



IN  
OPPOSITION.


By

Gertrude M. Ireland Blackburne.









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IN OPPOSITION,

Tho' losses, and crosses,  
Be lessons right severe,  
There's wit there, ye'll get there,  
Ye'll find nae other where.

BURNS.

"But out of her griefs and cares, as will happen, I think, when these trials fall upon a kindly heart and are not too unbearable, grew up a number of thoughts and excellences which had never come into existence had not her sorrow and misfortunes engendered them,"—ESMOND.

# IN OPPOSITION

BY

GERTRUDE M. IRELAND BLACKBURNE

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*IN THREE VOLUMES*

VOL. II.

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WARD AND DOWNEY

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON

1888

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*Recommencez toujours !* ni trêve, ni remords.  
Allez, recommencez, veillez, et sans relâche  
Roulez votre rocher, refaites votre tâche.

VICTOR HUGO.

TO  
J. S. AND TO K. P. S.

**This Sketch**

IN MEMORY OF 1883—1888

It's no in titles nor in rank :  
It's no in wealth like Lon'on bank :  
    To purchase peace and rest ;  
It's no in making muckle, mair ;  
It's no in books ; it's no in lear :  
    To make us truly blest.  
If happiness hae not her seat  
    And centre in the breast.  
We may be wise, or rich, or great,  
    But never can be blest.  
    Nae treasures nor pleasures  
        Could make us happy long.  
    The heart ay's the part, ay,  
        That makes us right or wrong.  
            *Epistle to Davie.*—BURNS,

# IN OPPOSITION.

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## Book II.—Conflict—*continued*.

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### CHAPTER IV.

#### THE PRETTIEST LITTLE PARLOUR.

All their life was spent not in laws, statutes or rules, but according to their own free will and pleasure. . . . In all their rule and strictest tie of their order there was but this one clause to be observed : *FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS*.—*Readings from Rabelais*.—BESANT.

As Grey Meredith went slowly downstairs he heard a voice familiar to him, and when he turned the corner saw Georgie Leyton. Surprise was mutual, and both with one consent began to excuse themselves. The truth was, that as Grey had returned to see Vera, so Georgie, instead

of going, had slipped into Carstairs' business-room on pretence of writing a letter. But the double plan had been frustrated, because the husband and wife had been together in Vera's boudoir. So Georgie, who had, of course, been too much at home in Grosvenor Place for anything to seem at all peculiar, had lingered to the last moment, and had only turned away when hopes of Carstairs' descent in due time had disappeared.

"Send that letter for me, Simpson," she was saying. "Get me a hansom. You there, Mr. Meredith?"

"Yes," said Grey. "May I be of any service to you?"

"Aren't you dining out? We shall all be late. Happily, no one but my old Doggie is waiting for me to-night. If you

were doing nothing, I would take you to see her—my old governess, called Doggie, because she is my watch-dog. Will you come?”

“Do you mean *now*?”

“If you like.”

“I am dining at the club by myself, at any time I like. There’s a confession to make. I ought to go to the House, you know. But there are some days on which one doesn’t do the things one ought.”

“Well, I hope it won’t be the thing you ought not to do to come and have whatever we can get from Doggie. Come and dine with us. You needn’t dress; or, if you like, you can, only be quick. You promised to call on me, but I believe you’re afraid of going to a bachelor-girl’s rooms.”

"Am I really to come?" said Grey, as she went down the steps. "I should like to."

"Then come. Seriously, I know there will be enough for you to eat, and you can go away whenever you like, and till then you can talk to Doggie!"

"What awful inducements!" said Grey, helping her into her hansom.

"Mind you come, in not more than fifteen minutes," were her last words as she sank into her place, and left Grey—astonished and amused, and pledged to follow her home as speedily as might be. It would take him all his time to get to Queen Street, dress, and on to Miss Leyton's rooms in an elastic fifteen minutes.

Georgie leant back, well satisfied, till she came to her own rooms in Park Street. She found there a curious little elderly

woman, who met her with welcome, which she carelessly repulsed.

“I haven’t a moment of time; you’ve arranged dinner?” she said, looking at the table already prepared in the next room. “That’s right. It isn’t Ralph who is coming, though; it’s some one else; all the more reason to be particular. Come and help me to dress, there’s a good creature, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

The pair disappeared into Georgie’s room beyond, and whilst they are away it may be sufficient to remark of Miss Spender that she had been a half-educated girl of fifteen, whom, some five-and-forty years before, the late Lady Carstairs had taken to be generally useful, first as copyist and secretary to herself, then as Ralph’s nursery governess; and then again as a

sort of companion she clung on to Temple till she and Georgie lost their home on the death of Lady Carstairs. When Georgie found that she could get most out of life by adopting independence, with good grace she proposed to Miss Spender that they should have rooms in town: Miss Spender should have the rooms rent-free, and, when Georgie was at home, share her board, and her small annuity would keep her in dress and extras. The arrangement was satisfactory to both. Miss Spender had an object in life, and a settled home; Georgie had a cheap house-keeper, and the name of a chaperon, with whom, on emergencies, it was not impossible to be seen; for the elderly lady had aged very neatly. Timid and fidgety, she admired Georgie's pluck and careless-

ness, and would have been much astonished if you had questioned unadvisedly her dear young friend's generosity in having the most unassuming of companions, most patient of maids, and most genuine of flatterers, in consideration of the small bedroom, the use of a room when not required, and her food at certain seasons of the year. Georgie, however, did treat her well in one way. She never said one really unkind word to the little woman all the time they were together, and, even if one thinks that she had not much excuse, one may remember that inexcusable words are rather common in life. Let Georgie, then, have in full this merit—that she made Miss Spender happy.

Grey arrived in the shortest possible space of time, as in duty bound, and found

no one in the little sitting-room. He looked round and saw how prettily and tastefully it was arranged; it being Georgie's home, all was good of its kind. There was a little dining-room at the back; the doors were open by some mistake; but in the other room Georgie had accumulated the spoils and the possessions of her life.

He was not left more than a minute or two alone; little Miss Spender came in.

“Mr. Meredith, I believe?” she said, in her frightened little tone. “Miss Leyton will be here directly. I am Miss Spender; you may have heard her speak of me? No?” she said again, as Grey had bowed and taken no initiative of speech, not quite knowing what the little figure was. “It is just like her; my dear Georgie never speaks of her own good actions. I

thought that she might have told you that she has provided a home for me. I can't tell you of her kindness; but speak of an angel," continued Miss Spender, with a little laugh—"here she is! I was just telling Mr. Meredith that you had given me this home to live in, my love; it saves awkwardness. When I was at Temple, in the late Lady Carstairs' time, I always said to any visitor: 'I am her ladyship's companion;' didn't I, my dear?"

"You always did what was proper, I have no doubt, Doggie, my dear; more than I do. You'll forgive my not making a stranger of you, and wearing my old tea-gown. I was so tired; I can't help not being fit to be seen."

Thus challenged, Grey was compelled to look at the tall shapely figure with close-

fitting gown of crimson silk, the loose front graceful with white lace (real lace, as Grey knew; men are no longer generally ignorant of such matters). She had just had it made; it was becoming and very handsome. She wore at her waist three crimson roses, fastened by a silver pin, and in her dark hair a silver arrow. Grey had never seen her look so well.

“Miss Leyton,” he said, “you’ll forgive my not making a stranger of you, as you say; that frock of yours is no more old than it is unfit to be seen! You see, I am too much for you.”

He could not help looking at her. He had thought her pretty always, for he had never seen her otherwise than animated; but to-night the rich colour, the graceful robe, gave her something of splendour.

"You are too cunning; yes, it is my new tea-gown; that is exquisite lace, almost the only thing I had of my own. I wanted to wear it for my own satisfaction to-night. You really like it? and me in? That is better still."

She turned slowly round before him, and he, nothing loth, scanned the form and then fingered the lace on the front.

"Yes, it is charming," he said. "It is a great success."

She was very handsome, and so full of colour and life. Dinner was announced, served and concluded.

"I suppose that you have never seen a bachelor-girl's rooms before?"

"You used that expression to-day," he said, as the servant finally left the room.

"A bachelor-girl?"

“Yes, doesn’t it describe me? Here I am in my own rooms, free and independent, going out as I please, though of course I’ve still to bother about getting a chaperon when Doggie is not quite the thing. And I am rather particular about who comes here, when a man needn’t be ; otherwise, you know, it is just like being a man in diggings—except that so many men have much more luxurious rooms.”

“I like the idea of the bachelor-girl,” he said ; “and I quite appreciate my privileges in being thought good enough for an invitation.”

“How silly you are!” she said. Grey bowed. They exchanged a friendly glance—she with a smile which gradually brightened, as if it had been wrung from her ; then she said, with some sadness in

her tone: "Yes, one has to make the best of things, and laugh sometimes when one would rather cry." She looked down. "I call myself a bachelor-girl, but I don't laugh when I wish that I had married happily; yet I couldn't have married any one without being fond of him." She spoke in low tones as of enforced confession. Grey always was a little slow, and she quickly prevented speech by following this murmur up. "Won't you smoke? Of course you will."

"Here? Oh! no. Supposing that any one came in? I know that you don't object to smoke."

"Ralph always smokes when he comes. He used to dine here a good deal during Vera's illness, you know; that's how I knew they could cook for you."

"If I smoke, you must smoke too," said Grey.

"It would make me ill," objected Georgie.

Grey laughed. "It isn't the smallest use fibbing to me; you do it badly, I am glad to see. You know that I know that you smoke—in private."

"Very well then, come into the other room," she rejoined, laughing, "and we'll have coffee and a strictly private smoke. No, dear Doggie, I only made that remark as applied to tale-telling out of school."

She passed her arm through that of Miss Spender and thus went into the little drawing-room, where a small fire was burning, made of wood.

"The evenings are chilly," she shuddered,

and stooping, took a splinter from before the fire, and with the other hand a silver cigarette case from the table, of which the spring flew open to her pressure. "There," she said; "try those."

Grey took one, saying, "Something special?"

She nodded assent, as she took one herself, and lit it with the brand, which she had held.

It was growing dusk.

"You look like the fire-spirit," he said.

"It is a favourite amusement of mine to whirl it round and make circles of fire; fearfully childish."

"One could only do that kind of thing on the sly in childhood; hence the fascination; one can best enjoy the things which one is afraid of suffering for."

“Yes,” said Georgie ; “I believe that Doggie still thinks that I’ll set myself on fire.”

The brand was nearly out, as she illustrated her remark, by quickly waving it about, forming another pretty picture ; her robe folded round her by a dexterous half-turn, while her train lay outspread by her feet.

“Now take that chair, you’ll find it comfortable,” she said. “Doggie, if you’re dying to knit, you may do so. You know that I am called Pussy, sometimes ; but it isn’t in reference to our cat-and-dog life, is it ?”

The short evening sped away. Grey found himself cleverly drawn out, and was very comfortable when half-past ten struck. Then suddenly Georgie said : “You must

go; I may be going out, and if so, I'll have to dress."

"I had no intention of abusing your hospitality so long," said Grey, startled to see it was an hour later than he thought; "I ought to have been at the House at ten. I suppose that you'd draw the line at coming to the rooms of a *boy*-bachelor some evening? You would come if I made up a *very* nice party for you, and you'll forgive my shortcomings in the way of hospitality?"

"We'll see," said Georgie.

"I'll try and get the Como party together, and put on Paul Wordsworth in place of Charlie, and get another nice fellow or two. And, Miss Spender, you'll come too?"

"Well, go," said Georgie laughing; "I must have half an hour to dress."

But when he had gone she sat down by the fire and meditated.

Miss Spender at length said mildly: "I think he seems very fond of you, my dear."

"I don't care whether he is or he isn't," said Georgie, and then, "Did you make your cap yourself, Doggie? It's quite sweet."

"Really, my love?" responded the little lady. "I know you like me to look tidy when your cousin is coming."

"Oh! he won't be here to-night. It was great luck meeting Grey Meredith when we had the little dinner all ready."

The door opened and Sir Ralph Carstairs walked in.

"I came to tell you that Vera can't go to-night to the Polish ball, but if you're

ready I can drive you to Mrs. Freeman's. Do you want to go? I can't go either."

"No, I wasn't going. You see I am not ready."

"There's half an hour, if you like; I don't care how you spend it, but more I haven't got."

"Use it in staying here. You're not tired, are you, Doggie? We have had Grey Meredith all the evening."

She stood with one foot on the fender and looked at him, a little defiantly.

"How was that?"

"I asked him to come."

Miss Spender left the room for the first time that evening.

"I suppose so. Do you mean there is anything in it?"

"I don't know, and I don't care."

“Well, I think it would be a good thing on the whole; really, I do, Georgie.”

“Most of the points are on your side. I am tired of all this. I tell you frankly that I don't care two straws for Grey Meredith, but I shall marry him if I can.”

“A good thing, too. By all means marry him.”

“It will not be the first chance I have had.”

“Glad to see you're wiser than you were then. Has this been going on long?”

“I don't know that it is going on at all.”

“Do you think he likes you?”

“I daresay that I can make him think so.”

“I thought you insinuated that he cared for Vera.”

"She cared for him. I daresay she does so still."

"You daresay? How dare you say a thing you don't know?"

"Why are you so snappish to-night. You have no right to control my words."

"I never said that I had. Vera swears to me that she doesn't care a rap for Meredith, and you——"

"Did she say so? I wonder why."

"Simply because, acting on your insinuations, to-day I taxed her with it, hence all this hullobulloo. I really think that Vera and I might get on a precious sight better if you didn't get into our way every moment."

"I'll take good care to keep clear of it for the future. Your meanness is contemptible."

"I meant no meanness."

"Then why do *you* say what you don't mean?"

"I'm tired of this," he said. "You must have expended your limited stock of sweet temper on your former visitor."

"*He* was extremely pleasant," she rejoined as Miss Spender returned.

"Then by all means invite him to return and remain," he sneered. "I mean it," he added after a pause.

"I wish I knew what you did mean," she said, half to herself.

"What does that matter to you?" he replied as he rose to go.



## CHAPTER V.

### THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

“She was a woman of a steady mind,  
Tender and deep in her excess of love,  
Not speaking much, pleased rather with the joy  
Of her own thoughts.”—*Excursion*.

“WOULD you like to have Meredith to dinner?” Carstairs asked his wife, quite amiably, at breakfast next day.

She was a little surprised. Meredith had dined with them formally and informally as well as being frequent in attendance; but she had not been asked as a matter of consultation whether he or any other guest should be invited. Was this a trap?

“Just as you please; who is coming to-night?”

"I have asked no one except Wordsworth, and I think we had better have two or three others."

"It is rather late for that, unless you find any one disengaged."

"Shall we leave it then at four? I asked Georgie to dine; of course she does not count as any one. You can ask Meredith if you like."

"I think it would be better not," she said quietly; "it would not have mattered unless you had showed him beforehand that you did not want him to-night."

"Perhaps so," he responded, not at all ungraciously.

In due time he came to the last of his letters. "From Charlie — more money wanted," he volunteered, holding the letter out to her. "He thinks that he ought to

live like a prince. He is fearfully extravagant."

"So many are the same," she said.

"Does that make it any better? You take this letter and answer it for me."

"What shall I say?"

"That I shall give him nothing more this quarter, and nothing but his allowance in the next. You may send him a £5 note as a present from yourself; here it is."

"Thank you very much; I shall tell him it is yours, of course. I think that you are quite right to be firm; but this seems rather a miserable sort of letter."

"Of course it's miserable! You know what I say: he may steal if he likes, but not one halfpenny more does he get from me."

This was not said at all *nastily*. Ralph was evidently quite in a good humour

Vera felt emboldened to make her own request; the storm of yesterday seemed to have cleared the air.

"Ralph," she said, "I wonder if you would be angry if *I* asked for money?"

"You; and for what?" he inquired. "Have you been gambling, or making a book?" He laughed, quite pleased at the thought of Vera thus distinguishing herself. "Do you want much? I can give you ten pounds if you like."

It was Vera's turn for astonishment. She had never owned so much in cash in her life.

"No, I did not mean that."

"Don't refuse a good offer."

"Well, then, I won't," she answered.

"Thank you."

"That won't do," he said, getting up

with the paper in his hand. "No, if you want a regular allowance, as you have said before, I *won't* give it to you. I have never complained of your bills, and you're quite welcome to increase them; but no woman wants money in her own home when she has only to ask for any mortal thing she wants."

"Indeed, I should like it," she rejoined. "There are many little things for others as well as for myself that——"

"Precisely. Your bills come in and I'll attend to them. You've got nothing to do with others. But I'll see that you have more in your purse if you wish. Now say thank you prettily."

"Thank you very much for these," she said, taking the two bank notes.

"Would it be considered too improper if

you were to give me a kiss?" he inquired, almost as if he were sneering at her.

She felt his two hands grasp her shoulders from behind and his face against hers. She, all astonished, turned a little towards him, and he kissed her full on the lips, as he had not done since before Daisy's death. The colour came all over her face, and, ebbing away, remained in two bright spots in her cheeks, so smooth and soft and delicate, the blue veins showing through the transparent skin on the temples. He passed his hand over her hair, so fine and silky. She was half fascinated, half angry, and raised her dark eyes to him to know what this access of regard might mean. So far as she could see he was quite in earnest.

He usually dispatched his breakfast and

went off to his writing-table; to-day he lingered. He generally took no real notice of her; this morning he was scanning every feature with what, it appeared, was a strong revival of the admiration which had made him marry her for her beauty.

“Have you no idea how much better-looking you are than the ordinary run of women?” he said almost involuntarily.

She winced. The look of pain came over her again.

“I’m *not* joking,” he continued, “nor jeering either. I’ve seen it in everything; man or woman, it’s all the same. Some have the real thing, and others pretend they have, and those get the admiration. Men have a need to admire something, and if you can only persuade them that you have what they require they’ll be de-

ceived for a time; afterwards they try to keep up the delusion to justify themselves for having called the fraud genuine. In the meantime, the genuine article lies on the shelf. Can't you get the look of thinking yourself a beauty a little more? Give yourself airs. Swagger does it now. That's all *you* want. Wear a white frock to-night, to please me, and move as if you knew you were a good-looking young woman."

After this little homily he left the room, and Vera re-read Charlie's letter, and by-and-by went to answer it. In her answer she said: "Ralph spoke very firmly and I think most reasonably about your spending so much; you must really be more careful, my dear Charlie. He will certainly give you NOTHING more, and you know that I have no power at all. But if you

will continue to be candid with me, tell me now exactly what you owe. I would like to help you in any way that I could. You have so many good qualities that it seems a great pity that you should spoil your life now—for nothing. I will try to get you a fresh start if you will promise me that you will keep free afterwards. I send you a £5 note which Ralph gave me for you, and perhaps I could spare you a little more soon if that is wanted besides the payment of all your expenses and your allowance so soon due. Ralph certainly has a right to complain, and I am sure that you will not wish me to say that I am disappointed in you.”

Anice came in before she had finished the long letter to Charlie, or had begun the notes of the day. Directly after that

Sir Ralph came again on his way out to ask if she had remembered to look out some white frocks. This was so evidently his wish that she went to find one.

She asked Bennett for one she chose from her stores. The woman said that it was not ready. "I wish to wear it to-night," Vera insisted, indicating the slight alterations.

"If I had known that your ladyship wished to go out of mourning so soon it would have been done before," Bennett answered with her disagreeable civil manner, perfectly aware that she was hurting the young mistress.

"Ah!" thought Vera to herself, "I will make an effort for power over Ralph if for nothing else than to gain freedom in my own room."

She went up to dress early, that is, rather earlier than usual, and inquired for her frock. It was not ready; it had not been touched, though there had been nothing else to do that day.

“Did you not understand what I said this morning?” said Vera quietly. She was in her dressing-gown, and her dark hair flowed all round her.

Bennett was silent.

“Were you unwell to-day?” persisted Lady Carstairs. “Have you any excuse to make for this—by no means the first—disregard of my positive orders?”

“I did not think that your ladyship required the gown at once,” answered Bennett, a little frightened by Vera’s rare anger, visible in attitude and look.

“I told you that it was to be ready

and understand, once for all, that I mean to be obeyed in future. Get it now. I have ten minutes to spare, and you can make it wearable; it must be done properly afterwards."

Bennett obeyed with the worst possible grace, even going so far as to slam the door after her as she went out, and coming in again with the dress, threw it down, with impertinence in every gesture.

Vera had often pretended not to see such fits of ill-temper, feeling sure that she had no remedy in dismissal, for Sir Ralph would not allow Bennett to be sent away. But, now recovered, Vera had gained immensely in mental strength from her suffering of the past, and she was determined to stand no more from Bennett.

"I should be extremely sorry to send

you away without being able to speak favourably of your services to me," said Vera, and Bennett stared. "Of course Sir Ralph and I have pardoned a good many shortcomings in consideration of your having lived with Lady Carstairs; but I am tired of this kind of behaviour from you, and I do not consider that you are in any way a good maid to me."

Vera's heart was beating, but she appeared calm. Bennett was pretending to unpick lace at the side of the *corsage*.

"I am sorry that your ladyship considers me a bad maid," replied Bennett, with a half-mimicry of Vera's tone and manner. "If Sir Ralph wishes me to leave I can do so. I would prefer a lady who had always been accustomed to have a maid of her own."

As Bennett said this her temper got the better of her, or her scissors slipped, and a great slit was made across the silk corsage, ruining the gown for immediate wear and necessitating an entirely new front. Whether she had done it purposely or not Vera could not tell, but the speech preceding the cut had been enough for her.

“I will speak to Sir Ralph about your leaving me as soon as possible.”

“I shall stay no longer than it suits me, your ladyship may be sure of that.”

“Hold your tongue!” said Vera. “Understand you leave me this day month.”

Bennett’s face of astonishment and wild rage would have been worth seeing if it had not been for the fact that it recalled to Lady Carstairs that she had no power

to send her away. Suppose Ralph refused to let Bennett go?

“And might Hi ask what is the reason of your ladyship’s parting with me?”

“Yes; I will tell you. During the three years you have been here you have presumed on your place in many ways, of which you are quite aware. To-day you added to wilful disregard of my orders extreme insolence of an unpardonable kind. I say nothing of the fact that—probably intentionally—you have now cut to pieces the gown which Sir Ralph wished me to wear to-night. That long cut is not a slip of the scissors, but, if an accident at all, was deliberately made worse.”

“Sir Ralph wished your ladyship to wear the gown?” said the woman, the corners of her lips down.

Vera did not answer. At this moment came a knock at the door.

"See who that is."

The woman went to the door, and Vera heard Sir Ralph's voice.

"Ralph," she called, "is it you? I want you."

He came into the room, and looking at the white drapery lying on the sofa, said: "That's right. And what did you want?"

"Only to tell you that I have been obliged to dismiss Bennett; I am certain that before you hear my reasons you will conclude them to be sufficient."

She was in her loose crimson robe, her hair partly unfastened; she looked him full in the face, and he returned the look. She had played for doubles or quits. To call him in on the spot was

to insure a crowning victory or a crushing defeat.

He showed his white teeth, but the direct challenge always pleased him, and she won her first victory. Let the reader remember that for two years of despair she had never attempted to obtain her own way, and patient Griselda is sometimes a wrong-doer by default.

“What you are certain of,” said he, after a pause, “must be accurate enough for action, in all conscience.”

He surveyed the maid, who had not withdrawn as she ought to have done on his entrance. “You have heard her ladyship’s words; she will no longer require your services.”

In delight Vera actually kissed her husband. What a relief it was; a double relief!

"You will be late for dinner," he continued, though far from displeased with her. Grey Meredith's adoration had been of this slight service to her, that it had given her some idea of a power which she had not even attempted to employ for its legitimate purpose.

"Oh! no," she said, "only I am very sorry for one thing, I can't wear white to-night—the dress isn't ready. I'll try to make myself look as nice as I can."

"What's the matter with it? It looks all right. You might have arranged it before now; you had all day to see about it."

Vera said nothing. A thought struck him.

"Did her ladyship tell you that she wished to wear this dress this morning?"

Bennett dared not answer.

“Can’t you speak?”

“Never mind it now, Ralph,” said Vera.

“If you will leave me I will finish dressing; we have no time.”

“Why can’t you wear it?” he persisted, obstinate as ever, and as determined in detail. “It used to look all right. Put it on as it is.”

“I really can’t, Ralph,” she said. “The truth is that the scissors slipped as Bennett was trying to unpick the lace, and it will not do till it is arranged. Do go.”

He was still persistent.

“Did you intend to wear it to-night? Was it an accident that it was cut?”

He had relapsed into his suspicious mood.

Vera knew he had an idea—one of those

ideas which made her feel contempt for him, and that he must think little of her—that this was an evasion of her own.

Not realizing how Vera, having gained her point, was not going into any more detail than independent wives need give as to the merits of a personal attendant, Bennett thought he was referring to her, and like many another, by voluntary defence betrayed herself.

“If Sir Ralph means to insinuate that I have destroyed your ladyship’s gown he had better say so, as your ladyship has done already.”

“Don’t speak in that tone to Lady Carstairs,” and again Vera felt that gratitude which is only obtained by those who call it forth by doing their duty in one deed out of very many.

“Why did you try to screen her if she cut your dress to pieces?”

“Because I hope now that it was not meant; it was accidental. But I do not acquit her of going too far, by intention, in other ways. Go and fetch my black dress with the lace.”

Bennett left the room with reluctance, and Lady Carstairs continued: “Ralph, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for allowing me my way in this.”

“There were ten chances to one I did not. You say that I never trust you. You know how I wish to keep Bennett, and I take your bare word that she ought to go. Don’t be late.”

That was all, and though it might seem exaggerated gratitude and a simple ordinary occurrence, to Vera it gave both

power and confidence. She had no sympathy for Bennett, who had so abused her trust and to whom she owed much petty wretchedness. In spite of the black frock condemned by her husband he was content with her appearance as a few minutes later she entered the room where he and Wordsworth awaited her.

Close behind her came Georgie, whom she had just missed meeting at the door. Vera turned round to greet her, and the two faces and figures were seen contrasted against the shadowy background of the room in its evening light, just as the two men were cut out in blackness against the window. Two good-looking women, two powerful men—a quartet of unusual social interest.

## CHAPTER VI.

### TWO AND TWO MAKE FOUR.

“ The beautiful ! the noble blood !  
I shrink as they pass by,—  
Such power for evil or for good  
Is flashing from each eye ;  
*They* are indeed the stewards of Heaven,  
High-headed and strong-handed :  
From those, to whom so much is given,  
How much may be demanded ? ”

*Lay of the Humble.*

THE dinner went off well. Wordsworth was evidently pleased ; he talked chiefly across the table to Sir Ralph, for so the *parti carré* had been arranged. He appealed to Vera occasionally, but took no notice at all of Georgie, which at length dawned on even his un-ladies-man-like perception just as the servants left the room. He made some observation to Georgie, obviously for the

purpose of making one. As it fell rather flat, and he was conscious of a great lack of the usual small talk, he tried again with a more personal remark, made also with a faint idea of testing Lady Carstairs.

“Grey Meredith has been with me all the afternoon, Miss Leyton,” he said; making a point of addressing her, because he knew too much about Grey’s feelings for Lady Carstairs, as he thought.

“Really?”

“It is not altogether a rare occurrence that he should enter my room. Don’t you think that he is a very sociable sort of fellow, Lady Carstairs? He was afraid that I had been offended by a bit of temper he showed yesterday, so he came to make it up, and made it up so effectually that I thought he meant to stay for ever!

His apology was delicious! Have you ever seen him make an apology? It is as funny as his anger, and both were needless with me. However, what I was going to say was this: he had evidently enjoyed himself immensely in your rooms last night; he said that you had given him an excellent little dinner, and a good deal besides, he said, which it isn't fair to repeat, Miss Leyton."

"Why not?" said Carstairs. "Georgie is colouring to find her good by stealth already famous, but I am sure only pleasant things were said."

"Well," said Wordsworth, "if I ever do repeat things, it is the good people say of each other, hoping for nothing again; that is quite possible, it forms such a small proportion of human speech."

The ladies stayed downstairs longer than usual, at the unanimous wish of every one; but as they were alone together for a few moments Vera broke the silence by saying: "So you had Mr. Meredith to dine last night?"

"Didn't he tell you so?" said Georgie, carelessly fanning herself. "I thought that you were interested in all he did."

"I merely made the remark," said Vera, much nettled. "But perhaps it is a little curious, as you were both here so late, that nothing was said about it."

"Then you didn't see him to-day?" said Georgie, lounging back, with a slight yawn behind the feathers. "I don't think that he was bored at all last night. Miss Spender seemed to amuse him. I don't believe that you have been once to my

rooms this year. Why don't you come? I'll ask Mr. Meredith to meet you at tea some day," she said, emphasizing the *Mr.* as if to mimic Vera's employment of it previously. "What's that passing?" she exclaimed, going to the window as she heard the men coming up-stairs, thus securing that they should be separated. Vera was still near the flower-filled fireplace; Wordsworth came to her naturally, and Carstairs joined Georgie.

By-and-by, with a piece of Turkish embroidery caught up and thrown gracefully round her, Georgie stepped on to the balcony; Carstairs followed, and they sat out there, whilst the other two found themselves alone. For some time they did not notice, and, save for the relief of free speech, they scarcely recollected again that they were *tête-à-tête*.

Yet, as otherwise they would not have done, they subtly slid into talk on abstract subjects such as passes but between sympathetic souls. And her calm beauty and his sober strength were respectively exciting to the two, tired of the restless littleness of more conventional society.

Carstairs could not have hit on a better plan to attract Wordsworth than to have made him "at home" at once. A large dinner would have bored him, perhaps, but, all comfort having been provided, Paul was thoroughly contented by this quiet half hour in the evening light with a woman who had interested him from the first.

How charming she was with her simple direct manner, and how fragile, with all her beauty, she appeared to him!

And he interested and absorbed her. He was so strong, and so restful, somehow, and there seemed the compassion of great strength about him; which a woman loves as she hates its counterfeit—the insulting pity and patronage of a common-place intellect on the wrong track. Such an ordinary one talks of himself on the first provocation, or unprovoked. Most men talk thus when they are interested, and a few are interesting when they thus talk. Men of Paul Wordsworth's calibre obey the same instinct. But *they* are not called egoists; because they talk of themselves so seldom, not finding provocatives—to every flower its own bee; nor bores; because their personalities, the eyes, the gestures, the physique, brighten the rare if then complete revelation. Any self-revelation

made by such men is partly more false and partly more true than the more easily-stirred confidences of others: more false, for they know how, and what, to conceal; more true, as they more readily perceive and avoid the fallacies of introspection.

It was not all at once that Vera gained Paul Wordsworth's confidence, though she had at once his sympathy. But that night as they sat together as strangers they were testing each other with examination, to which the easily-flowing talk rather acted as accompaniment than as aid.

As one on first arrival will see all the points of interest in a place, and on a longer stay will but add affection and association to his perception, so friendships are begun in the outline-complete knowledge of character which any observant

stranger may have from once seeing a man or woman. This clear design is afterwards obscured by the colours, put on in progress to the perfect picture of later days.

Paul and Vera thought of each other that night, but later on they never thought at all, they only felt their mutual content, nor doubted their own honour. Yet in his casual phrases Paul spoke a more intimate word.

They had been talking for some time when a pause occurred. Vera looked up. "Do you care to go out? The others are on the balcony."

"Not unless you wish to go. I am ready to do what you please, as I hope you will find me always, if good enough to learn to know me better. Do you wish to go out?"

“Not at all; I was afraid that it was rather stupid for you.”

“I pay no compliments, Lady Carstairs.”

“There is none, certainly, in supposing that I wish for them,” she rejoined quietly.

“As I had the worst of that, I shall have to say plainly that I could not be happier than I am at this moment—in society.”

There was something quaint in his manner which utterly distinguished the speech from the impertinence of a younger or less able man; otherwise without the ending it was too much to say to a woman so slightly known, and with it, too little of gratitude to the hostess.

“Do you dislike society?”

“Yes,” he said frankly, “I do.”

The way in which he said it made them both smile.

“Seriously, Lady Carstairs, it is not because I hate my fellow men. I love them all in theory, and a great many interest me in practice. But as, through no merit of my own, I have not to run after people, and as people think no less of me if I am not seen at every turn, why should I waste my time in washing the sands of society for the few grains of gold hearts which I can find? Why not count over and enjoy the pure gold already recovered from the earth?”

“You mean literature, or friendship.”

“Both. You are quick to take my meaning. I can have, I suppose, pretty free converse with any now living who have made their mark. Probably, nay,

rather *possibly* in these days of the press, we don't know who are the great men of the age or the great writers; yet such as they are, one—I—can perhaps have access to them and see them in all their personal defects. I prefer literature to literary men, and to literary women."

"But these are not in society."

"More is the pity that some are, and, for others, not for themselves, more is the pity that some aren't. A good man—let alone a genius—is out of place among those who can but stimulate his defects. You remember De Musset's words on the subject? I must send you a little paper—a critique of mine—on that sketch by his brother; it will, perhaps, be better for you than the original. Don't think me doubly impertinent," he paused to say;

“I was only thinking where you would get the idea quickest.”

“I have read some of your writings,” she answered. “And I remember the passage I think you mean. You quoted and commented on it. De Musset is tired of society, and asks if he needs must continue to live in it for the sake of experience.”

“You read that paper of mine? But how do you know it was mine?” he said, a little quickly. “It has not been re-printed.”

“Grey brought it to me,” she replied simply. “He has cut out a great quantity of your writings, and I liked that paper particularly. Of course I have read D’Israeli on the same subject, but his book is a delightful collection of anecdotes. Your

thoughts about genius in that essay on De Musset's *Biographie* pleased me especially because they were so pithy. Of course they were brilliant, but beyond that they were so extremely sensible. . . . I beg your pardon."

"Pray go on." But he saw that, having checked herself, she could not proceed. So he harked back a little: "As we were saying, society does not exist to help forward its hidden leaders; they exist to help forward society. Therefore—if there be any other means of keeping oneself in touch with humanity (which, by the way, society proper is not in touch with)—if my sympathies can be kept flowing (and they are usually checked by contact with the crowd in a drawing-room), why then, I say, let me go free. I am not a

young man: I am not seeking a wife, or mooning after the wife of another man. I am not trying to kill time. No one can give me more comfort than I find at home, and I have not the conceit to think that I give any pleasure to mortal soul in a drawing-room. Isn't this an instance of it? I don't even know how to secure my own?"

"What do you mean?"

"That I have been only listening to my own voice for so long. Do *you* care for going out?"

"I?" said Vera. "I can scarcely tell. Sometimes I think so—if I had been happy."

She stopped, and sought to change the graver impression, but at the moment Georgie entered the room again with Sir Ralph from the balcony.

"I am afraid that you have caught a chill," said Vera, as Georgie shivered a little.

"It is dangerous work for ladies in evening dresses being on the balcony," said Wordsworth.

"What have you been talking of? You both looked so absorbed we would not disturb you. Is it very indiscreet to ask?" inquired Georgie, taking the chair he rose and offered.

"Not indiscreet to ask, but difficult to answer. Our subject was society or sociability. You know, Carstairs, that speech for which I was never forgiven after a visit to a certain country-house?"

"No; what was it?"

"I forget. Something that I should have to go and study the ideas of a low pot-house before I could possibly be vulgar

enough for aristocratic society. But may I ask, as you set the fashion, Miss Leyton, what your conversation was about?"

"Mr. Grey Meredith," announced, and unconsciously answered, the butler.

Vera did not know then that Grey Meredith, coming out from a dinner which he had left early, had walked past the house, had been called to from the balcony, and had been pressed to come up for a few minutes by Carstairs, inspired by Georgie.

She heard his name. Ten thousand Grey Merediths could not have made her colour, but the instinctive knowledge that three pair of eyes and three classes of criticism were searching her, caused her to flush and hesitate. And Grey was nervous too. He did not like to meet Georgie and Vera together.

He was full of engagements. He came up for a few moments. But the evening ended for that party by Wordsworth asking Vera to look at his work some day, and by Grey clinching his invitation to Georgie and Miss Spender.



## CHAPTER VII.

### A TRIO OF M.P.'S.

“ One that knew courtship too well, for there he fell in love.  
I have heard him read many lectures against it.”

*As You Like It.*

THE House was thinly decorated with sprawling members; its physical atmosphere was close and its moral tone seemed to be affected by the enervating August night. From the Front Opposition Bench Paul Wordsworth turned round and spoke to Carstairs immediately behind him. An inattentive attention gave place to surprise and to interest, and Carstairs began to listen to the speaker opposite. Wordsworth began to write, showed something to another ex-Minister, then passed this on to Car-

stairs. Another whispered colloquy. Then Wordsworth beckoned to Grey Meredith, standing at the gangway, looking wretchedly ill. Grey came, disappeared, and returned with a volume. The upshot was that Carstairs, not Wordsworth, caught the Speaker's eye; that Carstairs, who spoke very well that night, was significantly pointed out as likely to be on the front bench ere long; that men wondered what Wordsworth was about that he did not rise to reply; and that whilst Carstairs was speaking Wordsworth slowly walked down the House, looking rather stern and grave, and after a few moments made his way to the Ladies' Gallery. Grey overtook him, and together they reached the top. A few country cousins—only five or six in all—Lady Carstairs and Anice

Bentley were the occupants of the gallery. Seeing this the two men entered.

"It is very hot for you here; come out on to the terrace," said Wordsworth to Vera.

"Anice has very seldom been to the House, and no one is here," said Vera. "We thought that we would come on for an hour or two. Ralph did not say that he was going to speak."

"Quite a sudden thought. The subject won't interest Miss Bentley. Do come out."

Grey had also sat down behind Vera, but had been talking to Anice. Each word uttered was public to the quartet. It was arranged that they should leave the gallery to the country cousins, all of whom appeared scandalized at the intrusion of members, who talked in low tones to those

ladies whose pretty coverings scarcely concealed the pretty evening dresses beneath.

Wordsworth claimed Vera as of right; Vera had no thought for Grey. So they went downstairs and out on to the terrace in the soft night air; it was fresh and cool; there was starlight in the shadow, but the lapping of the dark water threw waves of reflection of artificial light against the grimy stones.

“Would you like to sit out here or to walk about?” said Grey to Anice.

“I don’t care.”

“Then you should care. Hold up that skirt of yours, it is trailing on the gravel,” he answered in his cousinly fashion. “Come on! Let us go to the end.”

Anice looked nervously back at Vera.

“They don’t want us,” said Grey with

a hard dry tone. And in effect it seemed so.

There was nothing in voice, movement or attitude to betray how they stood to each other, but Grey Meredith, with an ere-while lover's penetration, had divined the truth: Vera Carstairs and Paul Wordsworth had no need of others now—they were deeply in love with each other.

Vera Carstairs and Paul Wordsworth had need of others now, to remind them, to make them conscious ere it was too late that they were on a dangerous path, a far more dangerous path than any which could be trodden by souls less finely moulded and less sensitively formed. For those who walk on the heights there is an abysmal fall from their narrow and difficult path along the edge of the precipice, when a

stumble of the same kind on the high road might only cover the garments with dust and strain the careless foot. There is a tragic element in the commonplace, but the commonplace element in the tragic cannot blind us to the fact that tragedy is not commonplace failure—it is a fall from a possible perfect. Yes, a possible perfect! For we *can* conceive of the perfect; we *can* portray to ourselves complete fulness of happiness; we *can* image to our thought the success of sinlessness: the pain of tragedy—of the ancient spectacle, of the modern love story quietly acted by many a man and woman—is this, that again the best human nature has failed to attain success or joy: our life is sadder for the failure of the strong.

And so, by the lapping waters of West-

minster, while as yet those two have not realized their danger, we feel the shadow slipping round them, the blinding fog of sophistry rising whilst they—together talking—know not that they are straying from their path.

Grey had more defined ideas than any of them—savage thoughts and half-cherished suspicions; therefore said he gruffly to Anice:

“They do not want us.”

They walked to the end, and returning looked over the water with its surging lights below the steady illuminations of the opposite bank. It reminded them of other days.

“But,” muttered Grey, answering thought by thought, “always sound here, and—— No; it is not safe for you to lean over here. We are not at Como now. Come away.”

They were silent. Anice had divined

one day what Grey's feelings for Vera had been; but Vera had said nothing more, and Grey knew nothing at all about Anice in this respect. She would not understand, he supposed, if he talked now, and he wanted to talk about Vera.

The others were not talking of love; the word had not been mentioned, nor the thought defined: they were only happy together, and in intimate talk, such as passes between those who sympathize with and who trust each other.

"Take another turn, then we will go back to them. How do you think Lady Carstairs is looking?"

"Much better, in spite of the hot weather. Don't you think so?"

"I suppose she is," said Grey gloomily.

"I daresay that you have seen her so

often that you notice no change; but I have only come back to town since Monday on my way north."

"Yes; why did you run away from town in the middle of the season?"

"One of my married sisters wanted me. But I see a very great change in Vera since I left, little more than a month ago. She moves so differently; she has colour and animation, and takes interest in things for herself. Of course she always was dear and sweet about other people's pleasures, and she seems to read hungrily, not dreamily. Oh, she *is* better. I am so glad. You don't notice the change much; you have seen her so often."

"If that were all I should notice the change," said Grey. "I have scarcely seen Lady Carstairs since you left."

Anice looked at him incredulously.

“Oh, it is quite true,” said Grey. Lady Carstairs seems pleased with her new toy ; but what can you expect from a woman like that?” He was so full of bitterness that he forgot his loyalty ; besides, weak men are never perfectly loyal to women—with women.

Anice fired up, as he had never known that she could to him, and in a second Grey had fallen from his pedestal—the ideal Grey had vanished, the ideal never formed but by the very first love-thoughts of a girl who will afterwards love another with all his faults visible to her discernment, and in spite of them. Faultless Grey was gone ; faulty Grey met her scorn. He could see her face by the gaslight.

“How dare you speak in that tone of

Vera?" said the girl. "'What can you expect from a woman like that?' do you say? A new *toy*! Take me back to her. I do not care to stay with you."

"Well," said Grey, not attempting to move, though she would have gone on, "do you suppose that every one is perfect?"

"I have begun to find that some people are more imperfect than I could have believed," rejoined Anice.

"You are not so nice as you used to be, Anice."

"Nor you, Grey. You have been quite different ever since that horrid Miss Leyton got hold of you; I *won't* call her Georgie!"

"It is rather amusing, your being jealous!"

“I? jealous?” with feminine self-defence.  
“Do you suppose that I could be—have anything to be—jealous of Miss Leyton?”

“It is charitable of you to take so much interest in me, then. I don’t know what you mean, Anice, and I advise you not to meddle with things which don’t concern you.”

“I am quite willing to have nothing more to do with you; only another time please don’t insinuate things about my friend, and one whom you used to pretend that you cared about too.”

This time Grey had to follow her, as Anice, tingling with anger and with shame at her own outspokenness, walked slowly back to the others, sitting in the shadow of St. Stephen’s. As they came up they heard Paul say :

“No, that is nonsense! I would rather have your encouragement and your counsel than that of any one I ever knew. Have you ordered tea or coffee, Grey?” he continued, perceiving the others.

“We ought to be going if there is no chance of my husband’s return with us. He has just sent a note to say that the carriage is not to wait for him. Are you ready to come, Anice?”

“I am quite ready,” said Anice, as the division bell rang within the House.

Wordsworth exclaimed: “Will the wicked never cease from troubling? You know it is this wretched system of wasting time on unnecessary divisions which takes all the soul out of a man, when he does not happen to wish to spin out a debate himself”

“If they voted by any other method—show of hands?” inquired Anice.

“The House is too small,” said Wordsworth. “I am afraid that, till after this division, whatever it may be, we shan’t be able to discuss the question of Parliamentary Procedure; we should be thankful for practical suggestions, Miss Bentley. Shall we find you here or in the ladies’ gallery in twenty minutes’ time, Lady Carstairs?”

“Could we wait here? Will you tell my husband?” said Vera.

“Do you want to stay, Vera?” said Anice, as soon as the men had left them.

“No, dear; but I thought that you would like to go back again. Would you rather go home?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“I shall be very glad. The policeman

knows me, and we can leave a message for the men, though I don't think that's necessary; we didn't promise to wait for them."

"Are they worth waiting for?" inquired Anice. "Do you know, Vera, I am beginning to hate men."

"A fearful sentiment," observed Vera. "Which is our way? We will leave their haunts as soon as possible."

The handsome and burly bobby with much graciousness aided their unprotected movements, and they were soon in the carriage, both silent, but Vera was looking content, and Anice was far from pleased.

"I suppose that I ought to leave you at home," Vera said, after they had already reached Grosvenor Place. "Will you come in for a few minutes?"

"It is too late. But I can go home alone."

"I'd like to come, my dear child. Have you a headache?"

"No." Then, after a short time, Anice realized how curtly she had answered. "I didn't mean to be cross, Vera."

"I didn't know that you were."

"Yes, I am, very."

"Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing really. I may as well tell you though, Vera, as you know how silly I am. Do you remember what you said of Grey? Well, I am beginning to see that it is true, and I don't want to. Town is emptier, isn't it?" she continued, *à propos des bottles*. "How pretty Piccadilly is a little earlier, with all the lights moving along it! Now there are very few."

"It is not every one who wants to stay in town now. When do your people go down?" inquired Vera, not pressing the subject of Grey.

"Soon, I think. Mamma is very busy still with her societies and things, and likes to get things organized for the winter before she goes away for the summer. Here we are. Good-night, Vera; thank you for taking me."

"Good-night, dear. Come and see me to-morrow. Home!" she said, as the door closed on Miss Bentley and the footman waited for orders.

"I shan't go to Mrs. de Lang's crush; it is too much trouble. I shall have time to read through those letters of Paul's before Ralph comes home."

Half-an-hour later she was in her own

room, a shaded lamp by her side, in a loose dressing-gown, seated in an easy chair. She had returned to the room over Grosvenor Place, and the wind came, from the trees of the palace garden opposite, through the open window. She undid the packet carefully. Between it and an inner wrapper was a half-sheet of paper, in Paul's clear square writing, pencilled, and perhaps slightly hasty:

“These are my letters of that date of which we spoke. They were sent back to me. I kept them, but have never seen them since then. You will keep them safely, I know, and as you care to see them, will recognize how great is my trust in you, how very willing I am that you should know the worst of me! It is strange that we consider nothing more

sacred than the revelation of our weaknesses ; that we cannot show a sense of the worthiness of another more than by wishing that our unworthiness were known. When you have read these letters to Caroline Vallery I may venture to do so and see in what I now am the better for this past self. Keep them locked up, though they are only initialled, I believe, here and there. The packet is marked to be burnt at my death ; I am glad that you should see it first.

“ P. W.”

Reading the inner inscription, Vera broke the seals after she had taken in the little note with interest. There were about a score of letters carefully folded, and a few little notes. The date was some fifteen years earlier. “Returned by

C. V. to P. W., and kept as wholesome warning."

This lay on the top as the packet was spread on her lap.

Before reading further, she began to muse on the extraordinary confidence which men show to women, on Paul Wordsworth's perfect trust in her so rapidly and fully acquired, and on the strange thoughts engendered by the circumstance of his voluntarily revealing to her what for so long he had cherished as a bitter memory or as a painful secret. To hold in her hands this monument of the passionate past of Paul Wordsworth! Paul Wordsworth! a name which men feared, hated, or honoured, but which was never thought of in connection with the suffering of sentimental need.

Vera was flushed and excited. She put

her elbows on her knees and held her throbbing head between her hands. She got up and moved her papers to the sofa at the foot of the bed, and placing them beside her, she lay down and began to read.

Bennett was still in her service for a few days longer; dismissed for the night, however, she would not return. Till Sir Ralph came home, which might be very late, she would not be interrupted at all.

The effect of reading at night on certain temperaments is, of course, very much greater than on others; but if ever written words have weight it is when perused by the intelligent or the sensitive as all is still around, and the mind, quickened by the quiet, has all its faculties receptive and all its capacities awake. An hour at night is worth three at any other time—dangerous

heresy for the many, doctrine of comfort and of helpfulness for the few! Fatigued by the spoken platitudes, wearied by the jar of social traffic, the mind gladly seeks repose with itself and with its real intimates in talk of what the world gibes at. Then, when it is silenced, speak the singers and the seers to whom our souls are akin. It is then in the solemnity of the hush, in the eager pulsation of sympathetic delight in what is best, that we feel that we "are greater than we know."

These writings were only MS. love letters, and though they were the love-letters of a remarkable man, they were exactly as the love-letters of others, save for the power of expression, save for the doubt which easy command of literary style seems, wrongly in most cases, to cast

on the spontaneity of statements. People forget that with writers, as with women, if they are ever graceful they are always graceful. So, with the love-letters of Paul Wordsworth, fifteen years before; the handwriting more variable than now. The letters were, as a rule, in form very models of style, and in substance the same outpouring of a man's soul which can be expressed as forcibly, if not as freely, by one who knows not how to turn a sentence. But to Vera these revelations of a true and loyal passion were more striking from their beautiful and simple wording, though in their framing the writer had never thought of aught but telling this woman how he loved her.

Vera had read the first, and before she took up the next, lying on the inner side

of the sofa at her left hand, she heard a step in the passage—her husband's! She bundled them together hastily and pushed them into a drawer before he entered her room instead of going through his dressing-room.

“I saw the light outside,” he said, “so I suppose you have only just got back from Mrs. de Lang's.”

“I didn't go there.”

“Then why did you leave the House? As you were there and saw me on my legs you might have stayed. How often am I to say to you that I like to know how things tell?”

“I wish that I had stayed. We went out on the terrace, I did not know that you were going to make an important speech.”

“Nor I,” he rejoined, with complacency restored, rubbing his eyebrows. “They took the division immediately afterwards. I don’t think they’ll ignore *Me* again on either side. *I* gave it ’em.”

“Then you had a success? I am so glad.”

“Very good of you, I am sure.” Then with a change of manner: “Did Meredith take you on the terrace? You had only Miss Bentley with you?”

“Yes,” said Vera, colouring under his scrutiny, “and Mr. Wordsworth.”

“Oh, that’s all right, if you had Wordsworth with you.”



## CHAPTER VIII.

### SLANDER.

“There is one shock at want of truth or goodness possible even to the untrue and evil—when they imagine that their falsehood may be true.”—*M.S.*

GEORGINA LEYTON had also stayed longer than usual in town that year. Grey had found himself less and less asked to the Carstairs. Sir Ralph never was quite sure of Vera; he believed her when she spoke, but the moment she was silent the original bent sprang back. Vera was ready to please her husband in all indifferent matters, and scarcely realized Grey's frequent absences. Besides, she had been vexed with him for little concealments, where there was no need for deception,

with regard to Georgie Leyton. Without the smallest intention to spy upon his movements, it so happened that from Sir Ralph, from Anice, or from Georgie herself, she had heard of his attention to Georgie, and caught him once or twice in the act of trying to make herself believe that he had been doing something very different when he had been with Georgie. He still professed great devotion to herself. She—it may seem strange, but is true—had not thought half so much of his declaration at Como, until she had seen Paul Wordsworth. With regard to *him*—women are not able to reap the advantages of personal innocence and of personal experience at once—she had no ideas yet of the state of matters between them further than this: surely there was

no one like Paul Wordsworth—so strong, and to her so gentle; so reserved, yet so intimately confiding to her; with such high aims and splendid powers, yet needing—and it seemed to him too that he needed—her helpful sympathy. Vera, therefore, but thought it right that she should see less of Grey, and then, through her thought of another, did not realize how painlessly and thoroughly she was fulfilling her intention of breaking his devotion to her. Besides, each of them was only one man among many who came to the house.

This threw Grey more into Georgie's society. Vera had been loyal to Georgie, and had not warned Grey against her. Indeed most women would have thought as she did once: "If men are

taken in like that, they are worthy of being taken in." So first it had been as one of the party of Como, then as a pleasant talker, that Grey had liked her. He found her always agreeable and always amusing, when he turned in to see Miss Spender and herself. An unattached man is easily bored, and it became a sort of undefined object of Grey's social life to meet Georgie. In his own eyes his devotion to Vera covered this. For Georgie and himself it was a mutual convenience, if one had to go out, to know that some one was there with whom one was sure of not being bored. His attention was constant, but he flattered himself not conspicuous. If many were coming and going to Grosvenor Place so also personally Georgie had too many acquaintances and

was too striking a woman for him to secure her for long at any entertainment against her will or without his effort. So it arrived, though of course he believed that he was pining for Vera, he arranged his little social plans for Georgie, and was annoyed if they were not successful. And of course Miss Leyton was to be met where Lady Carstairs did not go.

Little by little Georgie got in the thin edge, but not till it was fixed securely and imperceptibly did she intend to give the decisive blow.

“I have brought you some flowers ; nothing much,” said Grey, arriving with one of his best society smiles very early in the afternoon after the last night’s division. “Are you going out?”

“Lady Carstairs said that she would drive me if I turned up before four,” said Georgie, who wore an embroidered muslin in graceful fashion, with a hat of fantastic summer form which none but herself of vivid colouring and piquant glance could have supported. She looked, as the dressmakers would say, “most stylish,” and the word, artificial though it may be, suits Georgie Leyton admirably. She possessed style, and where all are more or less well-dressed style is itself distinction. She liked open admiration, and Grey was not at all ceremonious with her now, though as a matter of thought-out policy she always maintained some spurious dignity with that somewhat unsatisfactory young man.

“There!” she said; “I’ll wear some of your roses to-day. Aren’t you flattered?”

“They ought to be ; they really aren’t good enough for you.”

“Have you seen Vera to-day ?”

“Saw her last night ; she was at the House.”

“I think that she has treated you rather badly lately. We were all so much together at Cadenabbia. I don’t like that sort of thing :—‘At Cadenabbia I may know you again’—do you ?”

She went on, passing quickly over the thin ice, for she had begun to draw Grey out on this subject.

He did not appear to notice anything, nor did he really. He was a good deal less clever and rather more good-looking than he supposed. At this moment Georgie certainly had a little pride in her vice-royalty ; she could scarcely be said to rule

him yet; she knew that there was another sovereign still, but the governor on the spot has some power. He was undeniably what she wanted; tall, good-looking, as Carstairs said, "well-groomed;" just the sort of man to have about one in public—weak enough to be governed by a skilful hand, yet strong enough to hold his place among men, and not too ready to be caught by women. You see, Georgie knew well how much trouble even she had had to get him so far without alarming him.

"I scarcely ever see Lady Carstairs now," he answered, half in *persiflage*; "you only are faithful to me."

"Well, seriously speaking and quite between ourselves, I think that Vera is rather fickle. I don't mean that *fickleness* enters into this question at all, but she

takes fancies for people and drops them rather cruelly sometimes."

"Really?" said Grey, who bore this more patiently than he had done a former attempt at depreciation. "I should have thought that Lady Carstairs was not fickle."

"Of course, you knew her from a child; you should know best. I have only seen her since her marriage, and, of course, too, this is not what I should say to every one."

"It is not necessary to say that to me, a friend of both of you, I hope," said Grey.

"Well, what did you come for?" asked Georgie, suddenly changing the subject ere he had time to know that his words might be taken significantly. "I must go in a moment."

They settled some plans as if it were a matter of course. Grey left after a few conventional words with Miss Spender, after which that little person observed :

“My love, you know best, but don't you think people will talk if Mr. Meredith comes so often here?”

“You are not in the country, my dear,” returned Georgie ; “but you're right, Doggie; Mr. Meredith must make up his mind soon.”

Meanwhile Paul Wordsworth had been with the Carstairs for luncheon, after which he had remained with Carstairs for a long time talking of the political situation.

“I shall go and see your wife for a few minutes,” said Wordsworth as he rose to leave, their business being completed.

“You'll excuse my coming up with you?”

Wordsworth did so very readily, and found Vera ringing the bell at the departure of visitors who had come early "to catch her in."

A constraint suddenly came on them both when alone. Neither of them had a word to say, and they had got beyond the stage of conversation for the sake of not being silent. It was a rare thing for Paul to be embarrassed, and, trying not to hear the answer, he asked himself what it meant. For her, was the embarrassment of fittingly commenting on the packet received. He put the question after a few meaningless phrases had passed between them.

"Did you read the letters? Aren't they fearful rubbish?"

"I had very little time last night. Ralph came in earlier than usual, and of

course that prevented my reading them then, and to-day I have scarcely had any free time."

"Do not read them; it was foolish and impertinent to give them to you. Give them back to me."

"If you wish it," she answered slowly, a little disappointed at the withdrawn confidence.

"You would like to read them?"

"I said so yesterday."

"Then do so by all means. Keep them so long as you like, if you will keep them safely, please."

"They are safe now in the writing-table drawer, the centre one. I read some—the first two letters."

"Of course it wasn't the beginning of our acquaintance quite, though the last

letter marks the end; but every word which I wrote to her is there. I should like you to see them, after all; but be sure to take your time. Carstairs asked me just now if I should care to go to Temple in the autumn. I told him, the contrary to not caring, I should like nothing better; but I did not know whether I could; also, I have really bored you too much lately."

"I should like you to come," said Vera, on impulse.

"Would you really?" he rejoined with great eagerness.

At this moment Georgie Leyton came in.

"How are you, Mr. Wordsworth? Vera, may I run up to your room? I have torn out a plait."

"I'll ring for Bennett; she can come into the boudoir."

"Oh, if Bennett is there still, I'll run upstairs."

She did so, and rang the bell in Vera's bedroom.

Bennett came.

"I thought you'd gone, Bennett."

"Going to morrow, Miss Georgie."

"Got another place? You see where it's torn," she said, holding out the skirt.

"Is Lady Carstairs coming up, Miss Georgie?"

"No; Mr. Wordsworth is down there. He seems to be here very often."

"Have you got a maid yet, Miss Georgie?"

"Can't afford it this year."

"I'll tell you what it is, Miss Georgie;

you'll be wanting some one for your autumn visits, and I can't bear going to strangers. You give me what you can, and take me till Christmas at least. Wages isn't so much an hobject to me just now."

"I should be going to Temple; that would be awkward," said Georgie, not disliking the idea of getting Bennett cheap.

"Me and Lady Carstairs is to part friends after all, and if I go to Temple with you, Miss Georgie, neither of us may be quite welcome, but they'll have to put up with us."

"Very well then, Bennett. I can't give you much; but we'll try the experiment. You need not say anything to Lady Carstairs, you know."

"Lady Carstairs and me is not likely to exchange many superfusional words, Miss

Georgie, though we are to part friends. I picked up a little note in her ladyship's room to-day, when I moved the sofa, which I shall keep till some day her ladyship does *not* want to see it."

"What do you mean, Bennett?"

"I knows what I knows, Miss Georgie. Will the plait do?"

"You must be mistaken, Bennett."

"No, miss; I am not mistaken. Let me put up your hair at the back, miss; it's hall hout."

Georgie sat down, thinking that she should hear more, but not a word did Bennett say, and Georgie would not ask as the maid replaced the escaping tress.

"Miss Georgie," she said, "aren't you never going to marry? You look very well as you are, but you'd be the hand-

somest woman in London if you were married; there's the clothes and the position, which you'd know how to carry. A very different Lady Carstairs you'd have been; but there are others in the world besides Sir Ralph, and you'll excuse me, Miss Georgie, but who's to say it to you? but they do talk downstairs—not as I listen!—that Sir Ralph and you is too good friends.”

“How dare they say so?” said Georgie indignantly.

“That's what I say, miss; but they'll have something else to talk of soon. Lady Carstairs is very quiet, and thinks no one knows.”

“Is there anything to know?”

“That's as it may turn out. I can keep my own counsel.”

“Bennett,” said Georgie, very earnestly, “are you saying this from spite, or is there really anything which would displease Sir Ralph?”

“There is no love lost between me and Lady Carstairs, and I am not saying that to gain his freedom would displease Sir Ralph; do you think it would, miss?”

“Bennett! don’t say another word. This must be false! Lady Carstairs took my place, but she knows how to keep her own.”

“False, Miss Georgie? I am not likely to tell *you* false. I picked up a letter, here by the sofa; it was a love-letter, no beginning except just ‘my darling,’ and it was signed——”

“How was it signed? A name—quick!”

“It was signed in such a way as to show that the hauthor was devoted to her

ladyship, and with a full name. No, Miss Georgie, that's my secret for the present. It was not Mr. Meredith. Here is her ladyship. I think your hair will do now."

"I thought that you were never coming, Georgie. I should have been up before but——"

"You could not leave Mr. Wordsworth."

"Oh! he did not stay a moment after you left, but some other people came in. I hope that Bennett got you all you wanted."

"My hair came down."

"How unlike you, Georgie! You are always so neat, even without a maid. Fasten my veil, please, Bennett; that will do."

Bennett left the room and Vera completed her own toilette.

“You don’t seem to need much help ; you are very energetic now.”

“I am wonderfully well, really. I can’t bear Bennett about me ; I am so thankful that she is going. You liked her, did you not ?”

“Oh ! yes ; Bennett and I have been quite friends for years,” said Georgie, not continuing that she had engaged Bennett.

“You aren’t looking well, Georgie,” said Vera kindly. “Your hand is trembling ; can I get you anything ?”

“I am quite well, thank you. At least I think I am. But the room ! No, I wonder what this is ? Vera ! Water ! Oh !”

Georgie was fainting ; never having done so, she did not understand the premonitory symptoms. The mental shock of a few minutes back had been too much for her.

Suddenly a new prospect had opened before her. She recovered to find Vera bending over her, and saw the sweet delicate face before she could move or show further signs of consciousness.

“You’re better now—lie still. You’re on the floor in my bedroom,” said Vera, in a voice which sounded a very long way off.

Then the painfulness of returning consciousness increased, and in another minute or two Georgie was fully awake.

“How very foolish,” she said; “I suppose that I have fainted.”

“It is so hot. We won’t go out. There; lie down on the sofa and let me go on fanning you with eau-de-cologne.”

Georgie, like all strong people, was easily frightened at a slight ailment, and

was passive for a few minutes whilst Vera waited on her.

“It is impossible!” Georgie exclaimed aloud.

“What is impossible?” asked Vera, thinking she had spoken to herself. But Georgie got up from the sofa, saying:

“Nothing. What have you done with my flowers?” she continued in her usual tone.

“There they are, quite safe.”

“Mr. Meredith brought them to me, and I promised to wear them. Come, let us go out. Is my hat all right?”

Georgie was very quickly her old spiteful self in the carriage that day, and Vera lost her charitable concern, thankful that the session was almost over and that they were so soon going to Temple, so that

it would be her last drive with that young lady that season.

Still, she had a prelude of what was coming when in Bennett's last moment the maid said very respectfully, "I am sorry, my lady, that I have not suited your ladyship."

"Have you another place?" asked Lady Carstairs, "or do you think of taking a holiday?"

"I am returning to Miss Leyton, my lady."

"Miss Leyton?"

"Yes, my lady."

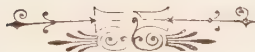
"I did not know that."

"If Miss Leyton forgot to mention it, my lady, perhaps I shall not be taking too great a liberty in asking whether your ladyship would mind my accompanying Miss Leyton to Temple?"

Vera was nonplussed.

“I should much have preferred that we started afresh, Bennett; but of course should Miss Leyton pay us a visit her servant would be on the footing of any other maid.”

“Yes,” hissed the woman to herself on leaving the room, “Miss Leyton’s *servant!* and your ladyship’s humble servant, and Mr. Wordsworth’s humble servant too!”





## BOOK III.

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### CONSEQUENCES.

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I trust in nature for the stable laws  
Of beauty and utility. Spring shall plant  
And autumn garner to the end of time :  
I trust in God —the right shall be the right  
And other than the wrong, while He endures ;  
I trust in my own soul, that can perceive  
The outward and the inward, nature's good,  
And God's : so, seeing these men and myself,  
Having a right to speak thus do I speak.

*A Soul's Tragedy.*—BROWNING.



## Book III.—Consequences.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### NOT SERENA, BUT VERA.

“But yet a cold shudder would quickly drive him away from her, and lead him to Bertalda, the daughter of man: all this, the writer well knows, could be distinctly drawn out, perchance should be, but it makes him too sorrowful.” — *Undine*. — FOUQUÉ.

TEMPLE is a beautiful place, and beautiful places, if charming among spring verdure, look even better when the first frosts have scarcely touched the yellowing leaves, when the air is still balmy, and yet a haze which is half clear and wholly luminous hangs round the castellated hall. I think if Georgie cared for anything it was for

Temple—even apart from its master. It had been for so long her home. Albeit at one time she had been bored by it, on the whole she had been very happy there; and no one degenerates so utterly as not to care for the place where happiness was once obtained which left no remorse behind, or, at a later stage, which implied no perilous and even shameful planning.

Georgie had not yet arrived at Temple, but Anice Bentley was there, among other guests. It is true that we notice few members of the circle who, more or less intimately, knew the Carstairs. Carstairs was a fairly popular man among men, and Vera had a well-stocked address-book of both political and personal acquaintances; nor were the Carstairs without links to their poorer neighbours—he to constituents,

and she to clients. Their circle was a large one, comprising many a well-known name. But, whether in town or in country, the most ardent admirer of the wife or the most eager talker to the husband would find that in society they were surrounded, and that when Sir Ralph worked, and when Lady Carstairs was weary, it was no use pursuing the chase. Very few were the intimates admitted to the business room or the boudoir, but elsewhere there were always shifting figures filling up the spaces, and forcing, as they always do, the real life-histories to be written only with invisible sympathetic ink on the margin of the social anecdotes visibly printed that all the world may read.

So Anice was saying to Vera, as they sat out on the lawn watching for the ar-

rival of the house-party for the week, "I am so glad that we had yesterday quiet, for I suppose that now I shall not see you very much."

"I will do my best to see you, dear, but of course the people one likes least are those that one has to see most of—they are always the strangers who want entertaining."

"I don't think they ought to want much here."

"They expect it. It is very hard to keep a house cheerful in these days, when people are not content without doing extraordinary and most childish things. I can't bear the mornings with these women! What treason I am talking! Tell me more about yourself."

"I have nothing to tell," said Anice.

"Do you know anything about Grey?"

"No ; do you?"

"No."

"And Miss Leyton?"

"I believe that she is coming to us soon. She has Bennett with her, you know."

"I hated Bennett always."

"So do I. But I had no reason for forbidding her the house; you know that she humbly apologized for her impertinence to me. Indeed, I was half afraid that I couldn't get rid of her."

"You have some one you like now?"

"I am not sure. Charlie writes to me in a rather depressed state of mind, but tells me he has something private to say to me. I am afraid that it is some scrape."

"I know he has lost money. He told me so."

“I cannot help him, and Ralph won’t ; and I think Ralph is right Why can’t boys behave themselves? Girls are so much less trouble !”

“They have just to go without things if they want them,” said Anice.

“And boys will have things at whatever cost.”

“Do you think that women don’t act on impulse?” said Anice. “Surely they do.”

“Certainly,” said Vera ; “and I don’t think that the best women are one whit more self-sacrificing than the best men. I wish that people would leave off comparing the two. There are different kinds of human beings—those who think of themselves and those who think of others—but I cannot believe that being a man or a woman

really makes much difference to ways of looking at things."

"Are you sure?" said Anice.

Vera laughed. "No, dear; don't puzzle your head in reconciling my crude guesses with your limited experience! Of course, education and circumstances are very different, and there always are great differences; but as Mr. Wordsworth said somewhere or other: 'The world wants nothing of its workers but work fitly performed. Fate turns out an average number of working souls each year and bids them shift for themselves to find bodies; so they get in where they can, like the hermit crabs—careless of the physique or the sex, so that they may have a *pied-à-terre* to shelter them.'"

"You don't think it is only *fate*, Vera?"

“No, in one sense. Yet I know, I see, and, would it were not so, I *feel* that no soul can pass from its path; it can only be starved from within or shattered from without so that its goal is never reached. And its way may lie very near happiness, yet, like the passer-by who treads the gravel, hot and dusty, because the bordering grass is forbidden, it may not seek solace so close to it. It must go on; how hard that the cool ease is very near!”

Anice was silent. Vera's tone was strange.

“How well you remember what Mr. Wordsworth said!”

“I remember prose easily. I liked the passage about the hermit crab.”

“Is the new edition of his books ready?”

“I do not know. I have not heard from him since I had a note before we

left London. I have some papers of his which, in the note, he asked me to keep safely for him. All our friends seem bad correspondents, though I don't know that I expect to hear from him."

"I saw in the *Athenæum* that the new edition of his books would be published early in October: do you not think he will send you a set?"

"I don't see why he should," said Vera, not quite consciously untruthful, for she was perplexed by his silence, and the obvious way in which he had separated his business with Carstairs from his pleasant intercourse with herself, ever since the day on which they had been interrupted before she read the letters. Now she had read them, while they pained her they interested her, and he had never even asked her to write

her opinion if he could not see her. Quite right; quite natural; anything else would have been impertinent; but it was strange that he had so impulsively sought her out for six weeks, then for as long ignored her. Her pride was a little hurt. She did not know that he was now afraid—a little afraid—of himself.

“Did you hear anything about Grey — about Miss Leyton?” asked Anice again. They were talking in desultory fashion that afternoon, as they waited under the rustling trees at Temple.

“No. Why? Have you?”

“Nothing but gossip. It can’t be true. Still, I wish that you had heard from him.”

“Miss Leyton? Georgie? I should utterly despise him if it were so,” rejoined

Vera. "It would be entirely her doing. And yet, what nonsense I am talking! Grey is quite free to marry whom he likes, and Georgie would be a very suitable wife for a man in his position."

"I was afraid so," said Anice, answering the contempt-covering platitude. "I wouldn't mind if only she were nicer. I never think she is nice."

"There are the carriages," exclaimed Vera, and in a moment or two was lost in the self-possessed and graceful hostess. She had developed since the past year in this also.

That evening her husband came up late from the smoking-room.

She was still at the writing-table in her room, having pleasure sometimes in writing and reading late, especially when the day

had been very full of small talk and exertion without mental stimulation.

She took out her book and looked briefly over the events of the year. Her memory supplied what certainly was not written down, as that she and her husband had had no scenes lately, and in many ways had become more conventional. Vera was striving to do her duty—all the more because she had indefinable ideas (though many women of their set would have found food for an afternoon's jest in the notion) that *she* could not harmlessly indulge in friendships perfectly natural to a really happy wife. Men less to be trusted than Grey or Wordsworth only waited for encouragement to supply attentions not given by her husband; and, for herself, there was a haunting sense of insecurity awakened by the

one man whom she felt—or had felt—that she could trust. So, since the first beginning of her acquaintance with Wordsworth, coinciding with a wish to take what was her own place in her own house, she had forced herself to be with her husband, to carry out his wishes and to see that hers were noticed.

Carstairs would never be a good man, but he was capable of being made a better husband, and of late there had been a revival of his pride in her.

May, June, July, August, September! Five months since the sudden parting at Cadenabbia: Anice Bentley had come out and had expanded in all ways, her love for Grey had departed, reaching its height on the day of the storm; Grey Meredith had renewed his passion for Vera, it also had

profusely flowered and presently faded ; the jealousy of Carstairs had subsided and his brutality had lain dormant for some weeks ; Georgie and Bennett had not troubled her ; and in part of that time Vera had been the friend of Paul Wordsworth.

Surely, surely, something must have happened ! His last—almost his only—note showed that he meant to claim his papers ; she had them safely in the writing-table of her bedroom at Temple. It was a rather gloomy room of old oak fittings and panneling, and the great four-poster, wondrously carved, was between her and the further door by which her husband entered. Through its arches he saw her in a loose white robe, trimmed with swansdown, and with wide sleeves lined with crimson, sitting writing by the light of the red-shaded

candles. The background was dim and mysterious, and the dark pillars framed a picture such as we should naturally have thought a Romney would have loved to paint as companion to his *Serena*. But, more's the pity, with honourable exceptions, our painters cannot work under the mental conditions needful for success—the studio is more perfect but the study less prolonged. And if a type of countenance reappears through the centuries, each type as it touches any century takes from its age a colouring never to be again repeated in the history of the world. Nor Romney nor Gainsborough nor any other had *Vera Carstairs* for a subject, though they painted women as lovely, as loyal, as intellectual and as well-bred (for poverty mars not gentle blood). So only the con-

temporary artist might have caught the quickened intelligence, the greater capacity for self-knowledge, for wider and more far-reaching charity, in the nineteenth-century woman. Facts chisel features. Vera Carstairs is not a Serena; she is a sensitive woman in modern society; no "heroine," no "wit," no "blue," no "religious;" though, with all her weaknesses and defects, capable of success in all these qualities. But also her picture would not be complete without the painter mirrored something of the serenity of the depths left undisturbed, as with Serena, and something too of the sharp, habitual, sensitive perception which is the characteristic of the nineteenth-century face.

"I thought you would have been asleep. It is no use tiring yourself, with

people in the house," he said, not unamiably. "Stop as you are!" He stood and surveyed her from the other side.

Vera remembered how Grey had once looked at her.

"That'll do," he continued, and came round. "I shall have a picture painted of you. You have been looking better than ever you did in your life this summer. You should always wear white, with a little colour about you if you like. Do you know how late it is? What have you there?"

"That? Nothing. My diary."

"With sentimental outpourings?"

"Notes of engagements, when I remembered to put them down."

"Take a sheet of paper and write down a few things for me while I remember

them. Are you too tired?" he asked, as the old clock outside struck two.

"No."

He gave her a few trivial directions, indicated one or two guests to be asked during the recess, and at length asked if she had invited Meredith. "Tell him to come on the 2nd."

"That is two days before Georgie comes."

"Is it? I thought that she came on the 2nd. However, let it pass; ask him for the 2nd."

"Is it necessary to ask him at all?"

"Certainly; Paul Wordsworth's favourite secretary. I have written to Wordsworth to know when he can come to us; we shall have to get a good party together. Set your wits to work. He isn't, like most of those literary fellows, satisfied with

amusing people; he can't bear them; yet he don't like stodginess a little d."

"Are you sure he is coming?" asked Vera, trembling a little, she knew not why.

"Why shouldn't he come? I thought you got on with him well enough. It's all very well to think of him as a foremost man, and as an excellent writer, as the sort of fellow the whole nation calls by his christian name; but it's a woman's idea—your sort's idea, I mean—to think that he hasn't human feelings. After all, he has superfluous brains, like riches, he can't use in politics. Of course I'm immeasurably his inferior in intellect—I'm not such a fool as not to know that—but if you have enough brains for your work, what does the public care for the rest? In shallows it doesn't do to draw

too much water, and Wordsworth's conscience and intellect overload him at times. So, take us both, where he stands now there is no reason why I shouldn't stand in a year or two, with a deal more popularity to boot; don't you see?"

"Do you think," said Vera earnestly, "that you could stand where he stands? You do it for yourself so entirely; he tries to do his work for the nation because he loves his fellow-men."

No sooner had she spoken out of the fulness of her heart than she repented. But Carstairs' brutality often proceeded from the fact that he had no finer feelings of his own, and he did not resent this in the least. He sat down beside her good-humouredly enough.

"Yes; I believe that Wordsworth has

some idea of patriotism, as it used to be understood, glamour and glory, even at his age, and with his experience; but I don't profess to understand the pose for posterity spirit."

"Oh! I do," exclaimed Vera, her face kindling. "It is not posing for posterity, it is only thinking how you can help to take away some of the causes of suffering; the world can't help remembering a few of those who do them good; one would like to be among the remembered, but, if not, there *are* good men among the forgotten."

"Spoken like Wordsworth himself. In the meanwhile, to-morrow you will write a little line to the great Paul and ask him to name his own time for coming to us."

"It will be sufficient if you write."

"If I had thought so I should not have told you to write. Have you any objection? Don't you want him here?"

He scrutinized her keenly.

"I don't know," she faltered. "Wouldn't it be more rest to you if we had a few other people, not political?"

"Don't talk rubbish! As if I can rest in this state! I tell you that, so far as one man can aid another, Wordsworth can help me, and he seems willing enough to do it. I'd give a thousand down for him to stay three nights here merely to set people talking——"

"Oh! it is only three nights?"

"I didn't say so. If he comes at all he'll stay on, I suppose. He was full of it one day. Get him in the house--the

world knows he's here; that's one thing, but ridiculously small after all: get him to stay on with us, and if we don't become Siamese twins my name is not Ralph Leyton Carstairs."



## CHAPTER II.

### “THAT’S ALL.”

Th’ young men noo-a-days the’re poor squashy things—the’ looke well anoof, but the’ doon’t wear, the’ woon’t wear.—*Amos Barton*.—GEORGE ELIOT.

GREY arrived at Temple a few days later. He was not in his usual spirits—that was evident, and seemed to avoid Vera’s eye; something was on his mind.

The house was not full, but others were there and had to be entertained; it was not till just before luncheon next day that she saw him alone. She had gone into the garden to give an order, and returning by an old-fashioned walk came upon Grey by himself, digging patterns in the moss-grown walk, and carefully burying

fallen petals of the pink roses on the wall above him. He was engrossed in making these little graves of moss and gravel. As she came round the corner his face was from her, and he saw nothing till she heard him say to himself:

“Confound it all!”

“What is the matter, Grey?”

He started, jumped up, put on his best society manner, and made a few ordinary remarks.

The day was slightly autumnal, with bright, steady sunshine, and a wind with warning of winter in its touch — a smell of earth, of summer fulness on the wane, an atmosphere of saddening prophecy.

Hostess and guest, two casually meeting and carelessly talking—and behind one, at least, the summer of his life, before him

uneasy consciousness of mistake; the other, all absorbed in her own story, out of charity wondering at his sudden unsociability and gloom!

At length, as they returned to the house across the lawn, she stopped. Neither of them quite knew what phrase of politeness had been coined by the newly-developed Grey.

He laughed nervously at the pause.

"Have you time to turn back with me? I do want to speak to you," he said with changed tone.

"It is nearly luncheon time. I'll have a walk with you after tea, and show you the place. That is if I can."

"Do. You must make the opportunity, please."

"How do you like what you have seen of Temple?"

“It is a fine house—very. Yes, you had some excuse.”

“Grey!”

“I’m in a vile temper. Everything is going wrong with me.”

“You’ll be better after luncheon.”

“Don’t know that I shall be better after tea,” he said as they came up to the others, whom they had already seen during the last few remarks.

Grey was an unsatisfactory guest that day. A type of man who is usually most useful and most easily disposed of in a country house, to-day he had objections to everything, made in a slightly ironic and wholly ludicrous way, it is true, but, as all declared at length, simply meaning that he was inclined to do nothing.

“That was it,” he affirmed, with a

languid air which Vera knew to be artificial; "the whole crux of modern life was that nobody *could* do nothing. It used to make life bearable in *his* younger days—sixty years ago—that people who hadn't to work didn't work. He was going back to that."

A little chaff of course followed, but nobody was surprised when the question was put to him point-blank that he really chose to stay at home, wanted no one to play tennis with him, and, in fact, intended "not to be seen till dinner-time if his absence, as no doubt it would be, were considered agreeable to the company."

But if his absence were agreeable Vera's was not. After tea, at which Grey did not appear, Vera left her guests to themselves; it is a time in which the hostess

may allow herself to rest a little in order to recover her spirits for the ordeal of dinner—ordeal if the party persists in being dull. The evenings were already chilly at five, and by half-past six one wanted fires and was not sorry to see lights. Grey, not appearing for his walk, she did not think much of, being occupied with writing and plans which as she had not managed to do in the morning. But, pressed for time, she got through the necessary work in half an hour, and was thinking that she ought to return to the hall in case men or women lingered to be talked to, when the door opened slowly and Meredith entered.

“May I come in?”

“Yes.”

“I knew you were alone.”

“What have you been doing all day?”

“They are shooting to-morrow. I was afraid that I couldn’t get a word with you,” was the not quite coherent reply. “I must speak to you.”

“If you had come earlier, we might have gone out with the others; I daresay you could have got in all you wished to say.”

“They were all prowling about the garden, and there are hedges and things! I had much sooner trust to stone walls than to those walks. How can one tell who’s listening?”

“Dear me!” said Vera, “it can’t be so important as all that, can it?” She spoke very lightly, for she had no wish for Grey’s confidences now—and it did not seem as if she were likely to get any.

He sat down and was moodily silent ; his face was fretful, and he pulled his moustache.

“ You have not been in this room before.”

“ No, it is very pretty ; like everything else of yours.”

“ None of that, please !”

“ I suppose not.”

“ Gentle Meredith ” had become more or less a pet of the House of Commons from various qualities ; careful dressing and charming manners slightly contributing to his success ; but his pleasant ease now deserted him, and his high collars afforded him no support. Perhaps he looked best in town, like most men who are of the more refined social types, but he was sufficiently athletic to appear to advantage in his rough suit. Not a word could he get out.

Vera had more to do than to watch his embarrassment; she rose to go.

“Oh! do wait a moment!” exclaimed Grey. “You haven’t spoken so many words to me since I have been in the house! Every one is all right. . . Look here! I’m going to be married. There! that’s all.”

It was the very gloomiest face with which this announcement was made, and Vera, possessing some sense of humour, could not help herself from smiling. She turned away to conceal the treacherous corners of her mouth, and he thought that she was offended. He did not guess that she had lately been ashamed of ever taking him seriously.

“Don’t be angry with me! I could not help it; I never intended it!”

“I am not in the least angry; what on earth do you mean? Nothing could have pleased me better than to hear of your marriage to some nice woman. I wish you every happiness. Tell me all about it,” she said, very much relieved, and a little amused. Now she understood that Grey, even if he dared not suppose that she would care, had certainly some cause for embarrassment when he had to eat his own words on the subject of his marriage in the most practical fashion.

He did not respond to her invitation.

“Mayn’t I even know who it is that you are marrying?”

She knew now how many women Grey had run after. She noticed he had used the verb to be married instead of to marry; was it an accidental slip?

“Can’t you guess?”

“It is so awkward sometimes! One hears your name in connection with so many people!”

“That’s a lie!” said Grey. “I beg your pardon——”

“I think you may indeed.”

“I never run after people. It’s very hard that a man is at the mercy of all these women.”

“Do you think that a man ever is who knows his own mind?”

“Do you know what snubbing things you say? For a quiet woman who is not regularly spiteful, you make the very hardest hits. Well, you’re right. I’ve just drifted into this. I have no fault to find with her, but I never intended anything more than amusing us both.”

“Is that the way you look on it? You make me despise you thoroughly; you call yourself a man, and dare to speak of your marriage like that? What right have you to propose to a woman and then come and tell another that you never intended it—but that you have no fault to find? I think it is cowardly.”

“I wish that you were a man,” said Grey between his closed lips, as he started to his feet and faced her as she stood. “How dare you say such things? You forget that it is a woman who is cowardly when she abuses her impunity.”

They were both in deadly earnest now, not as before when Grey used language which, impossibly strong from man to woman—gentleman to gentlewoman—might be taken as half jest.

“I abuse no impunity, but I take the privilege of friendship,” Vera answered with dignity. “How can I like to see you so degrade yourself?”

“Am I the first man who marries one woman preferring another?”

“Is the poor man who was hanged this morning the first murderer? Surely if wrong were justified by precedent we all are innocent!”

“Thank you!” said Grey. “Does it make no difference if *you* are the woman preferred?”

“Yes. If what you say were true it would make me more angry that you could think so badly, so despicably, of me as to suppose that I might care to hear it! Your former professions were bad compliment enough; but believing that you were

in earnest I treated them too kindly. Why could you not come to me now and say frankly: 'Vera, I am going to marry So and-so?'"

"Don't you know who it is?"

"How should I know?"

"Nonsense!" said gentle Meredith. "You know it's Georgina Leyton! Well, then," he continued, not seeing into her mind, nor yet feeling the revulsion occasioned by the certainty of that of which gossip had forewarned her, but of which she had been really incredulous — "Well, then! Vera, I am going to marry Georgina Leyton: congratulate me on what I neither deserved nor expected! Is that what I should have said at first to please you?"

"To please me? Do sneers ever please me?" Then with some inconsistency: "I

have no doubt that you are worthy of her : you are too humble ! I hope that you will be very happy together. When is the wedding to be ? ”

“ I believe before Christmas. We were engaged a week ago,” he replied, trying to imitate her return to conventionalism.

“ Do you know she is coming here to-morrow ? ”

“ Yes. Carstairs told me so when he asked me.”

“ Did he know ? ”

“ Yes. So I believe. I didn’t understand quite why, as Georgie’s of age ; but when I asked her not to announce it for a week, or till I had come here—till, in fact, we were here together, you see—she said she had to tell him, he had been her guardian.”

“Oh!” said Vera.

“I thought, perhaps, he’d have given you a hint, and anyhow that you’d have guessed. You never gave me an opening at all either yesterday or to-day!”

Grey was quite ready to talk once more, but Vera had not cooled down.

“I should not have thought that your announcement needed so much ceremony,” she said, preparing to leave the room.

“What are you to do when you’re in such a position as mine?”

“No doubt it is enviable.”

“I can’t get out of it; she won’t be jealous, even of you!”

“You didn’t tell her anything about me?” exclaimed Vera.

“I did, though. But she wouldn’t be choked off—I mean, she didn’t seem to

mind. But I told her one thing, that if you objected——”

“I object?”

“And at least if I did not care about being in the same house with both of you I would not stay!”

“Kindly remember not to class us together,” answered Vera, with her stiff manner. “To me you owe the courtesy due to your hostess, or to your host’s wife, as you came at his invitation for the special purpose of seeing his cousin, if you please; your promised wife will require more of you: you will please us both by never mentioning her name with mine in any connection whatever. If you wish to remain here you can do so. I fear that I must leave you.”

She found that it was nearly dressing

time, and every one had disappeared from the hall except two men who were playing billiards in the further corner. She spoke to them, and then passing through, went to her own room. Not far from that was the passage leading to Anice Bentley's room. The girl was there on a long visit. Vera suddenly thought that she would find her.

"You have all you want, dear?" said Vera.

"Yes, thank you," answered Anice. "But, Vera, come in for a moment. Have you heard about Grey?"

Vera did not quite know what Anice meant. "What is it?"

"His engagement?"

"Yes. He told me about it just now. How did you hear?"

“I have a cousin who has been staying in the same house with them: ‘Can’t you see how it has been done?’ she says. I can! Oh! isn’t Miss Leyton horrid? Poor Grey! At least, I don’t know why I should call him poor: he is so silly!”

“My dear Anice!” said Vera, who had not quite expected this.

“It isn’t pride, if you mean that, Vera,” said Anice, frankly meeting her look. “I have been seeing how silly I was for a long time. It wouldn’t have been so silly if Grey had been better worth caring for, but he is *so* weak! Of course till one was out, and saw others, and heard what people say, one was no judge. I am ashamed of myself! But I don’t believe other people know him as we do.”

“Oh, no,” said Vera, “he is very

popular ; every one likes him. Mr. Wordsworth said that none of the younger members are so much run after as is Grey."

"Isn't it a pity?"

"So he seems——" Vera stopped herself; "he seems," she could not turn it off.

"Lily's letter is here; it came by the evening post. Grey was so funny all day, and I saw him go to your boudoir, so I supposed he wanted to tell you," said Anice, too full of her own ideas to notice much. "I couldn't have believed that any man could be so silly. I *know* he can't care for her, and I don't believe she cares for him."

"We don't know that," answered Vera severely, and a little bit untruthfully.

"You remember at Cadénabbia? I didn't understand then, but I do now when I

look back to it. And," continued Anice, with the tactlessness of an eager young girl, "I think what made me despise him was when he was angry with you, that night we were at Westminster, for talking to Mr. Wordsworth: he said that you had a new toy; wasn't it insulting? I was so furious with him."

Vera was taken by surprise, but said nothing.

"That was another thing I didn't see, but I saw afterwards that he was fond of you. I thought it was impossible that he would care for a married woman. One doesn't know at first."

"Take care, Anice. You shouldn't say such things."

"No; it doesn't make things right that they happen, but at first one doesn't

know that they do, you know. How much older one gets all of a sudden sometimes!"

"You have changed, dear, very much in these six months. You are not to change into——"

"A Georgie! I won't. There! what a horrid Pharisee one is! No, what vexes me is the sort of way that *she* settled to do this and she has done it; it isn't as if he thought it wrong to like you and gave it up bravely; it is just that he's as weak as water."

The dressing gong sounded through the house.

"Just half an hour! I must go!" said Vera, and Anice rejoined:

"I am so glad you came; I wanted to tell some one how silly Grey had been!"

## CHAPTER III.

### A GIRL'S MISERIES.

Cette enfant avait la timidité sainte,  
Des longs cils d'or voilant les chastes regards bleus,  
Et des gestes d'héroïne effrayés et frileux.—*Coppée.*

IF Anice thought that Grey had been silly, if Vera thought that he were weak, to him, save by the fact of making no allusion whatever to his engagement next day announced in the *Morning Post*, they did not betray themselves. Nor had he any real idea of the ground of their objection to Georgie, but was rather complimented than otherwise that they did not appear quite to like it.

He had been nettled—perhaps shamed—by Vera's rebuke of at least the way in

which he had told her; it is a sore trial to a man to be considered unmanly by the woman whom he has cared for. At first he thought that he would go at once. But Georgie was coming. He was fretful and dissatisfied. Of course he really did not know that the self-excusing way in which he spoke of his engagement being unexpected had a great deal of truth in it; he could not tell what a puppet he had been. A favourite socially, any number of notes and letters were forwarded to him in the course of the next few days—masculine chaff, feminine gush, jokes, congratulations, and good wishes from many an acquaintance and friend, accompanied by all kinds of circulars bidding him know where every possible need of doting *fiancé* or fondest husband might most cheaply

and artistically be satisfied. The house-party in social fashion made him a friendly butt. He did not dislike it at all.

Of Georgie, too, he was sufficiently proud, and quite pleased with any permitted favours. They were not a demonstrative pair of lovers. Georgie was not a whit softened by her engagement. Looking remarkably handsome, never had she been more self-possessed, more amusing for men, or less really amiable to Vera and Anice. One thing only was altered: she was invariably publicly polite to Vera, and almost invariably "nasty" to Anice.

She held Grey aloof from both, but any attempt of his to speak to Anice was openly interrupted. The truth was Georgie believed nothing of her own insinuations against Vera with respect to Grey, and

she knew how proud Vera was. No word of Vera's would be spoken to turn Grey against Georgie. But Anice, who had not successfully concealed her liking from Georgie, was young, impulsive, in many ways unconventional. She disliked Georgie as Georgie felt, and Grey was fond of Anice—he said so frankly.

All that week Georgie lost no opportunity of making Anice ridiculous in public ; Georgie's little stings, which the younger girl in youthful sensitiveness took as shameful slight, simply got upon Anice's nerves. The girl dreaded Georgie's presence, fancied that every one saw what a fool she was. Anice's more serious retorts seemed clumsy and almost ill-bred rejoinders to the little exaggerations and apparently innocent *double-entendres* which from brilliant Georgie shone

as brilliant wit. Georgie could hit hard if need were, but she did not hit Anice hard. For Anice it was *only* as if she were unable to move and some one continually came from behind her back and tickled her face with stinging nettles. Georgie did not attack Anice quite so much before Vera, but she teased her chiefly before Grey, who was so much amused by the cleverness of Georgie that he did not think of the misery caused to Anice : his knowing Anice so well, and having known her from a child, increased his enjoyment, yet made him perfectly unable to understand that the teasing was torment, or that Anice had any excuse for “firing up at Georgie’s chaff.”

Grey found Anice alone one day in the hall. There had been a scene that morning. After furnishing sport for some time, and

having been successfully meshed by the *reticularius* of chaff, against which her youthful sword had failed to win her freedom, Anice had left the room very brusquely, and Georgie had said to Grey before two or three of the others, "What a pity it is when a girl cannot take chaff quietly."

The others had agreed, and Grey, who really liked Anice, in all good faith had determined to talk to her on the subject.

So he began judicially, with an elder brother's air, sitting down beside her in the cushioned oriel window.

"My dear child——"

Her attitude confirmed his idea of her temper having been lately soured. She rose and interrupted him:

"I think the others are coming; it is five o'clock."

“Wants five minutes yet. You needn’t be so impatient. Sit down, or I shall think you are angry with me. Have I done anything to offend you?”

“Why should you think so?”

“I shouldn’t have thought so if you hadn’t avoided me ever since I have been in the house. That’s right. I know you know how fond I am of you; you’ll let me say a word to you for your own good.”

“I don’t think that you need trouble yourself.”

“There it is, my dear child! you’re so touchy now-a-days that you can’t stand a thing—whether it is chaff from a comparative stranger or a caution from a friend! How awfully sorry I should be, don’t you know, to see you become one of those regular little shrews! Not that there is

quite that danger yet, but do learn to take things more lightly!"

Grey thought that Anice was ashamed of herself as she did not answer.

He continued, "I daresay Georgie was a little trying this morning——"

"I don't want to hear any more," answered Anice curtly.

"You needn't be angry. You know it is only because I like you I speak. I did want you and Georgie to get on better together."

"It is not necessary."

"But it is, my dear child. All your family have been friends of mine for ages, and you and I always were friends too; don't you remember the old school-room teas and all the fun we used to have? Your people were always good to me, even

when I was as poor as a church mouse. Do you think I forget kindnesses? Nonsense, Anice, you must like my wife for my sake; and it isn't as if she were an entire stranger either. I have had heaps of congratulations from all sorts of people, you know, and you, silly little thing!——”

“Please do not speak to me like that.”

“Well, *you* have never said anything more than a stranger might do; some little prim speech before all the world; why are you so cold?”

A door opened near them — an oak panelled door which had been standing a little ajar. The oriel window was close beside it. Georgie had come through the dining-room within, and between the square formed by the inner and outer doors and the thickness of the walls—a great feature

in Temple—Georgie had stood to listen to them, not jealous, but amused. Grey had his back to the door, which also screened them from sight of Georgie, and Georgie from sight of them. She heard and enjoyed almost everything that had been said.

But when Grey put this question, knowing how easily he was led, partly because she really wished to humiliate Anice—having played long enough, pussy-like, to kill the little mouse—partly from mischief, Georgie stepped out with her bright laugh.

“I’ve been listening! I confess it. Only a word or two,” she said, gaily. “But I thought it fair to stop you, my dear. Should I have heard no good of myself? I am afraid so.”

Grey gave up his seat to her.

“That isn’t fair, Georgie. Why, if you’d

only heard all you'd have heard me saying that I wished you two to be friends," he said, leaning back against the wall. "I am sure that you never mean half you say to this child, and she frets over it in a silly fashion. She's awfully young, you know, as I've been telling her in a grandfatherly way."

"I am afraid your time has been wasted," said Anice. "If Lady Carstairs comes tell her I shall be outside, please."

"Why can't you stay with us? We have nothing to say to each other—have we Georgie?—half so important as settling this quarrel," he persisted with masculine denseness, that is to say, with a calm, dogged persistency in blundering which takes special shape in some men.

"My dear Grey," Georgie laughed, "Anice

thinks I'm fearfully wicked and atrociously unkind because I prefer not to be gloomy, and till she is older and wiser there is no chance for us two to kiss and be friends—unless you'll do it for me! Anice would not object to the proxy, and I'm not jealous!"

"How dare you?" began Anice, her cheeks flaming, while Grey frowned at Georgie; he instantly, she after a moment, saw that it was best to pass it off as a jest. But not having Georgie's power of gliding over the dangerous spot Anice walked away in silence.

Georgie, now fully launched on the track of bad taste and mischief, got up, caught Anice, and brought her back.

"Let me go! What do you keep me for? Grey, make her let me go!" said

Anice, as Georgie held her firm in a grip from which she could only have freed herself (if then, for Georgie was far the stronger) by a struggle more fitting to children in the nursery than to Miss Leyton and Miss Bentley in the hall of Temple.

“No, I shan’t let you go,” said Georgie, placing her in the further corner beside which Grey was standing.

“Now, Grey, don’t let her go. There she is! in the corner, for being a naughty child and slamming the door in a temper this morning! You see that she doesn’t escape.”

“All right,” said Grey laughing, and thinking it good for Anice to be teased a little. “We won’t let you out till you promise never to do it again! It’s no good, Georgie; she won’t play! Let her

go! She can't take a joke," he continued, drawing the conclusion from the face of Anice.

"Oh, no!" said Georgie, "she hasn't heard the joke yet! I think it had better be a private joke between ourselves now I come to think of it, as I meant it to be. You go to the other side of the billiard table, and turn your back to us; if we want—if Anice wants—you to share the joke, then you can. I'm awfully good to you, my dear, letting you decide whether Grey is to know it," she continued, to Anice.

Anice remained silent and pale.

"Now, here it is!" said Georgie, drawing a parti-coloured ribbon from her pocket which had evidently been round a sailor hat.

Anice knew in a second what had happened. Grey had brought his hat to her

one day at Como to have a new ribbon put on to it. The old one had been kept by Anice at first as a great treasure, though lately she had meant to throw it away. Somehow Georgie had got hold of it, and having seen the origin she guessed the rest. Georgie had had it for some days, and intended to tease Anice with it. Anice, of course, did not realize that only self-betrayal could make the ribbon significant to another; even if it were Grey's ribbon — and equally it might have belonged to any man of his college eight — it might have been kept just because it had not been thrown away.

No being but a very young girl could imagine the agony which this trifle awoke in poor Anice. She became sick and dizzy with such a shock as might be experi-

enced by an unhardened criminal on seeing his first forged cheque in the hands of the police.

Poor child! She felt at the mercy of that mocking, bright-eyed older girl, and Grey there, standing as if he were playing a game of proverbs, but in full hearing! He was sure to look round for the mere sake of fun—Georgie's fun was always costly to others.

"Give it me!" she said angrily, snatched it suddenly and crumpled it up in her two hands. "O what a *horrid* girl you are!"

Disengaging herself by a dexterous twist which caused Georgie to slip on the polished floor, Anice, bearing off the ribbon, bolted through the dining-room and up to her own room.

Georgie made the most of her slip,

cleverly turning it into a fall from which she could not recover without Grey's help.

"Did you ever know such a little termagant?" inquired Georgie, as her composure was restored.

"Do you not tease her a little too much? I used to think Anice the gentlest girl in the world. What happened? I thought you were having some joke against me, you know. I only heard you say, 'Here it is,' and she called you a *horrid* girl in a tone of intense conviction. I turned round and see her flying and you on the floor. What was it?"

"Nothing. She's a little fool. I wonder that I took the trouble to tease her."

"Tell me what you said now—why can't she take a joke from you? What was it?"

“Well, if you must have it, it seems that Anice has always been in love with you——”

“Don’t joke like that, Georgie; of course the child is fond of me. What’s the good of putting rubbish into her head?”

“Putting it into her head! My dear and very innocent young man! I noticed it the very day I first saw her with you. I found that ribbon you took off your hat at Cadenabbia in a book of hers, and she fired up as you heard; that’s all. It was a stupid joke enough.”

“If you really thought there was anything in it—which I don’t believe,” rejoined Grey knitting his brow, “you had no business to say a word to her—certainly not to me; and if it

was a joke, it was uncommonly bad form. Let Anice alone for the future, please; I should think it ought to be no effort to you to abstain from such vulgarities."

"*Dear me!*" exclaimed Georgie. "What nonsense you talk! Gravity doesn't suit you."

"It is a pity. I am in earnest. You let Anice alone. Of course I am bound to stand by you in public; but you know perfectly well how many things you say and do which I think are unworthy of you. How very little it would take to make you perfect," he continued, bending over her.

"Are you in earnest now?" she said, smiling again at the adroit conclusion. "Well, I'll let that silly little girl alone, if that is a step to perfection in your eyes."

"Thank you," answered Grey, smiling back at her. He was fascinated by her always, even when she grated on his finer instincts. He liked being with her, though perfectly genuine in telling Vera how little he had intended to be bound. In some cases, however, where woman disposes, man proposes.

"That isn't much to do. I was tired of teasing her. I knew exactly how to make her miserable though."

Perhaps this speech restored Grey's self-possession, and reminded him that Georgie was usually called *Pussy*.

"That will please me," he said. And for the rest, couldn't you take pattern a little more by V— Lady Carstairs?"

"*Never!*" said Georgie with sudden energy. "Never! Thank heaven *I* am no

hypocrite! My faults are all to be seen. I am not all goodness outside and in reality the reverse."

"You don't mean that Lady Carstairs is," said Grey laughing, for her words might be understood in two ways. "No! I don't think that *you* could call her a hypocrite."

He did not take her seriously, and seeing this, she availed herself of the way of escape. "Nor can I. You'll have to take me as I am! Lady Carstairs—Vera—is one person and I am another; but perhaps some day you'll see whether you would wish me to try to become like your pattern. If you are coming out—let us go."



## CHAPTER IV.

### AN ÉDITION DE LUXE.

. . . . Merely you said, "Why should woman suffer? Aye, why should she? "By heaven! I'd coin my very soul, and drop my blood for drachmas." These things are, and he who feels how incompetent the most skyeey knight-errantry is to heal this bruised fairness is like a sensitive leaf on the hot hand of thought."—*Keats' Letters*.

CARSTAIRS had announced his intention of becoming a Siamese twin of the great Paul. This, however, was only as yet a matter for his own cogitation and for confiding in Vera. It is not easy for the second-class politician to pass as the equal of the first class statesman; that requires indefatigable energy, mastership of the art of pose, and of a great many tricks which are a good deal more showy than the same statesman's attitudes! Now Car-

stairs had scarcely enough of these to deceive or to interest the newspaper readers who measure a man's power by the amount of smart copy provided from his utterances. Carstairs was scarcely sufficient charlatan for popular taste. On the other hand—with many excellent working qualities, stubbornness, hard-headedness, powers of resistance; in fact with all the sterner requirements of an official; as, with certain capital qualifications of a speaker, good voice, good manner, good presence, knack of imposing himself; with many personal advantages which in private life were defects,—Carstairs by no means was in touch with Wordsworth, and by no means could attain more than being considered an able man by those behind the scenes.

Perhaps he knew it. But if he were

sufficiently powerful, politically and socially, to pose as equal with Wordsworth—what then?

It had been rather a busy recess, and Ministers in and out of office were running over the country, for attack and defence, for charge and countercharge, retaining and attaining position. Carstairs was just of sufficient importance to be in demand, and at this time he came in for a good share of press attention. Meetings constantly took him away from home, frequently leaving Vera with a houseful of guests on her hands—and for over a month Paul Wordsworth was among them.

Paul was not much trouble to any hostess. He went off once or twice to meetings, but, of course, he was of sufficient importance not to have to speak

unless he chose: that is to say except it were necessary. Personally, he never went to any house where he could not work, nor cared to pay short visits. So having made up his mind to come to, he stayed at, Temple, where there is a library rich in all that the heart of literary man or statesman could desire. Wordsworth had deeply at heart a comprehensive scheme of amelioration; that had to be worked out in academic form—the practical details long since accumulating; each day brought the endless appeals and the great and little, the practicable and the impracticable, demands, from busy and from idle people. Carstairs had a couple of secretarial clerks always at work, even at Temple, whom Wordsworth was asked to consider as his own on emergency,

nor was Grey Meredith, when on the spot, able to see his chief slave without joining him, even in holiday time.

Wordsworth therefore kept himself and others occupied, and, being a worker to his finger-tips, thoroughly enjoyed working amidst the external leisure and the perfect comfort of his country life. At the same time, the fact of his abstraction and concentration for part of his day made him delight in restfulness and amusement when he had finished, and occasionally he gave himself an entire holiday, being fully aware of the great value of idle hours for busy men.

It is not to be supposed, therefore, that his conversation at such seasons was of a brilliant type; on the contrary, it was full of triviality, of silences, even sometimes of bad jokes and feeble puns; he was much

less sparkling in society than any other man there; he was also distinguished from all others by an almost childish curiosity to know and to understand—no subject came amiss to him, and he catechized groom or gardener, billiard-player or beauty, on the mysteries of their professions with an earnestness and an interest only redeemed from pedantry and boredom, as it certainly was, by the charm of his manner and the simplicity of his desire to learn.

There was never a word or look or tone which in those days told Vera how much she had become to him. He knew it all at length, but he was strong, very strong, and he told himself that he was safe in knowing that he loved again; not now the worthless woman so easily reached by himself and as

easily reached by others, but the woman worthy and unattainable whom he must never try to reach. It was quite safe, he thought, when, with a sharp pain, this dawned on him; safe because he knew it was all impossible, and he could not flatter himself that he was more than a friend to her. He knew now why he had let her see those letters; he knew now why he had tried to localize his intimacy with the Carstairs; he knew why on the pressure of the husband he had yielded; and he knew why he had come to live and work for the time at Temple.

He found himself thinking of a hundred little trifles for increasing her truer happiness, for softening off the edges of everyday small worries: such men can do this well when they choose.

He got through an immense amount of work; but his idle hours were his delight. He was saved from the evils of popularity by that in his nature and position which made men shy of intruding and rendered him hopeless to the women whom he would not encourage. He was too much a man of the world to make his attentions to Vera exclusive, but he liked to show that they were unique.

"Lady Carstairs," he said, after luncheon one day, "will you come with me to the library? I have something to show you."

"No one else admitted?" laughed Carstairs, who was just within hearing.

"We'll admit you to your own library, and not turn out Grey if he likes," said Wordsworth. "But I can't have any one

else; it would make me feel shy, being unaccustomed to public speaking as you know."

"Herein are mysteries! How do you like the new sensation of feeling shy?" inquired some one, and almost the whole party entered the library with some curiosity. As a rule it was sacred to Wordsworth during his visit—not that any regulation had been made, but that before four o'clock business was always going on: the clerks in and out, and Grey, or sometimes Carstairs himself, writing for Wordsworth.

Little quips and chaff were floating by from one to another, as the party followed, but Wordsworth, though of course speaking in jest, would have preferred to have been taken in earnest.

“You have quite established yourself here?” said a lady.

“Yes; they are very good to me,” Wordsworth answered; but he said nothing about the object of his invitation.

“And what are we to see?” inquired Georgie.

“The library at Temple is well worth a visit, as the guide-books say,” Wordsworth replied.

“But we all thought that you had something to show.”

“You weren’t invited to the show,” answered Carstairs. “Isn’t that it, Wordsworth?”

“You have said it, not I,” rejoined Wordsworth. “How sorry I shall be to leave this room! I suppose,” he continued smiling, “that you won’t let the place to

me ; it would be beyond my purse, too, I'm afraid. It is simply delightful being at Temple."

Carstairs regretted the absence of reporters ; but there was a lady present who earned her five-shillingses, and in her social letters which were leaded for the columns of six provincial newspapers of large circulation there would appear little descriptions of a week in a country house with Paul Wordsworth. However, as that great man did not seem inclined to contribute towards their entertainment, the party settled on couches and chairs and proceeded with the chaff of the hour.

It were easy to sketch those groups—the women (two with characters for vivacity to maintain, another supposed to be a semi-invalid), besides Georgie and Vera ; the five

or six men, besides Grey, Carstairs and Wordsworth : all more or less good-looking and able to give and take, to pose and group, to listen and whisper, to arrange and to suggest ; a scene in which every one contrived to be or look of importance and possible interest during the few days or hours of spurious intimacy ; four or five little knots of beings half occupied with themselves and satellites, half attentive to that constellation whose movement we trace throughout. The languorous woman, Georgie's friend, under cover of pose and placidity, was a keen observer ; but she never appeared quite awake when men were there, which had precisely the same effect of stimulating the attention of those superior beings as had the vivacity of the in all senses wide-awake young woman.

And at the end of the book-lined room stood Vera, her husband, and Paul Wordsworth, with Grey and Georgie a little apart, as if they were playing a comedy for the benefit of the others. So in truth they were, but it was a play with neither speech nor action, were such a thing possible: only the grouping was dramatic.

Even that did not last long, for also this group subsided. It would not do for stage-dialogues to be as irrelevant to the action as are the scattered phrases of intimate friends in public.

Georgie, of course, brought back conversation to its real subject.

“Books everywhere! What a waste of time a library means, doesn’t it? Why, you haven’t been getting more new books?”

she exclaimed, as she looked at a little stand near one of the writing tables.

“Take care,” said Grey.

“Why? Whose books are they?”

Grey laughed.

“Am I to point the finger of scorn at you, O Chief?”

“No,” said Wordsworth; “they are not mine.”

“Oh!” whistled Grey.

“Mind your manners, young man! Carstairs, they’re yours—yours and the lady’s, that is to say—’oping as ’ow you’ll both accept them with my dootiful respecks. It was too bad to force me to present them in public. I told you that you would make me blush. They are nicely got up, aren’t they?” he continued, as the little stand was wheeled by Grey in front of

Vera, and the others came round to look.

Wordsworth had then written about eight books; four are of a very high order. These formed the first and advance set of the uniform stereotyped edition which, of course, every one knows. They had been placed in a stand of old oak to correspond with the library fittings, and each volume, bound in russia, had been tooled in truly luxurious fashion.

“How charming!” murmured the chorus, who did not in the least appreciate the gift.

Carstairs grasped Wordsworth’s hand.

“My dear chief! you don’t mean this for us?”

Vera was silent.

“You like them?” said Wordsworth, turning to her.

“Indeed, I do,” she answered.

“That’s right. It seemed great conceit to get up my own works like that, but I thought that on my offering this first copy to you for this splendid library I might at least impart a little extrinsic value——”

“Hear, hear!” murmured Grey.

“Young man, mind your own business!” said Wordsworth. “I am glad you like them, Carstairs. Now will every one have the kindness to change the subject? *I* never supposed it could interest others. How are the charades going to be arranged for to-morrow? Can I be of any use?” he said, rather desperately.

More talk, but Wordsworth soon left the room, when Carstairs was able to recur to the subject of the books, and to receive the comments on the honour, for such,

by those who knew Wordsworth, it was accounted.

“The chief has written every letter about it with his own hand; he was just like a child over it, and interrupted his best piece of work this morning when it arrived,” said Grey. “No one else was to touch it, if you please.”

“Such a fuss to make about it!” murmured the languorous lady to Georgie. “Dear me! how conceited these writers are over their stodgy things. I wouldn’t read one for a hundred pounds a line, would you? And no doubt the dear chief thinks he has given his friends the most choice present man can make!”

“My cousin takes it at its valuation, you think?” asks Georgie.

“Sir Ralph, at the world’s valuation;

Lady Carstairs, at rather more than the donor's, my dear."

So innuendoes passed as the subject was dropped again, for by this time Georgie did not scruple to point the little laugh at Vera; her hearers, however, persisted in taking it as pure chaff. Between Paul Wordsworth and Lady Carstairs there did not seem to be much foundation for scandal. But, "quiet people, you know——" said Georgie with a laugh not quite merry.

Just before the first gong that night Vera came alone into the dimly-lighted library. She believed Paul to be quite safe in his own room, and every one but herself gone to dress. Paul Wordsworth was the only guest she would not have sought to find.

Poor little Anice—though even to Vera she would give no reason—had decided to

leave the day after her dispute with Georgie ; after that, others had come and gone, and just then Vera had no woman in the house whom she really liked. This, amid the changes of other guests, had made her all the more appreciate that amongst the more permanent members of the circle was Paul Wordsworth.

The reading-lamps glimmered, and the fallen fire glowed on the perpendicular lines of dark carving, the dusky bindings, the substantial furniture and the few busts. Paul Wordsworth's gift stood against one of the further windows, where the heavy embossed curtains completed the sense of mystery and shadow in the room. The library had several niches formed by sets of shelves placed as screens at right angles to the wall—in this respect like that of Hawar-

den; these had been later additions made in the same style as that of more ancient panelling. The room, therefore, appeared quite empty, whilst Wordsworth was there between three walls of volumes.

She came softly in and went to the other side of the room, selecting from a lower shelf the work she required. She had taken one of the smaller lamps, and, as she stooped for the book, the light she held above her head fell on her hair crowning her as with an aureole. Whilst it prevented her from seeing, this light clearly revealed every feature to Paul from the other side of the library. As she put down the lamp she came across the room and, half way, she noticed that she was not alone.

She started, as nervous people will, and

then said quietly, "I was going to look again at our present."

"It vexed me that every one trooped in, or that as they did so discovery of this was made," he said, as together they went to the stand. "I felt such a fool. It looked as if I thought so much of my own works. Yet I only wanted the very first set to come here, and I thought then that perhaps *you* would care sometimes to look at them."

"It will be a very great pleasure," she said in her sweet way, with something of the grace and nothing of the incongruity of an old-fashioned child. "It is the gift of all others we would have cared for."

"You really mean it? You like my writings? Would do so if you knew nothing of me? Knowing me, you might

pity me; be sorry that so much life-blood was poured out in vain; but, if you had not known me, would you really believe that literature is the better, that life is the better, that I, who needed not to toil, have worked, and that I have tried to teach? Is my life—which men call so successful — really nothing but failure? Answer me truly. Do not be afraid to tell me what you think.”

The knots in his brow were prominent, those brilliant eyes shone in the half-light, the keen face seemed all aglow, and the voice, trained to turn a period, rose and fell in the genuine revelation of the worker's soul.

“I cannot tell,” she said, answering truth with truth. “It is not one's outer life by which one can judge; but, for

the rest, I think that you must have helped many more than you can ever know of."

"A statesman and a writer cannot know, it is true; one must be content with the fact that failures are not for very long allowed to fill foremost positions: yet it is of a more enduring influence I speak. What is it to lead the crowd for a moment? Nothing; and, if it were, that would be beyond my power. No: my only hope and consolation is that, having got the right to speak at a point where hundreds assemble to hear the new thing, in the thousand there may be one whom I can influence; and of a dozen of these perhaps one whom I can *teach*, because, able to teach himself, *his* thought is stimulated by my phrase, even though a phrase

—a poor token which in place of the true gold here and there in our state of spiritual siege may purchase the necessities of life for the starving. Well! I have put my best self into these,” he said, laying his hand on the volumes: “surely, as I tell others, I may believe that no genuine work is wasted. And yet of myself I often think it is.”

“Would it please you at all—I am no one, yet it might please you—to know that it always makes me feel better to read your writings? I am sure it would have been the same if I had not known you.”

She hesitated as she spoke.

“Thank you,” he answered gravely.

They both seemed to use words so little as they stood there together.

"I wonder whether I might add to my conceit of to-day by giving *you* what I hoped you might perhaps like; it is of no value, and yet perhaps it has a value of its own."

Speaking in a low and hurried voice, as if he—Paul Wordsworth—were nervous, he took from his chain a key and, opening a despatch box on the davenport appropriated to himself, produced and gave to her a thin octavo in vellum. Across the right hand corner, in gold letters on the white skin, was a facsimile of his signature: Paul Wordsworth, with the month and year. Within was an exquisitely-printed volume entitled "*Credavi et Credo.*"

"There is no other copy, except a set of proofs I keep for myself; it is only a selection of what I like best, and believe

most sincerely, in what has been said through me. Do you care to have this essence of egotism or of egoism? It will not bore you?"

"The only copy?" repeated Vera. "For me? It is too good. I won't take it."

"And why not? I did it for you. Look at all I have signed in that stand, that's for the world; mayn't I choose those pages—so few—for myself?"

"For yourself, yes. It is ——"

"Give me the pleasure of your receiving this. No one else will ever have the like, worthless or not as it may be. See! I have chosen the passages you have told me you marked. When you read these, wish—pray if you like—that I may practise what I preach; nor be myself faithless to my faith."

They were very near together as he pointed to some of his thoughts, chosen carefully from their context, and reprinted with more care than for a public edition in the one beautiful little copy for herself.

There are many works that the bibliophile desires to have; but Paul Wordsworth's unique copy will not pass into the market during this century. Perhaps by-and-by it will lose its sentimental history; yet then, because of its romance and rarity, publicly catalogued it will fetch its weight in gold.

Without their love stories few would care for literary men; without romance, how were their relics preserved!

Paul Wordsworth realized the scene perfectly, and he caught sight of some of his own words on the rough hand-pressed

paper as he looked down on Vera reading them with her soft eyes.

“I like that,” she answered.

He read the thought in question.

“I’d like to be able to act upon it,” he answered. “I wish you’d tell me how to autograph—what to put in—your public copy; this thing is only for yourself, you know.”

He took the first volume of the complete works from its stand, and moved away from her. She knew nothing of the effort.

The gong resounded through the house as he seated himself at the davenport, pen in hand.

“Will you write in mine when the other is autographed?”

“First, if you like. May I put ‘To

Her for whom this little book was made by Paul Wordsworth?' It is the best, because the simplest, thing I can say; of course I could frame any phrase to order, but that's just why I'd rather not. And for the other—Who's there? Carstairs! You're the very man I want," he said, turning round. "I don't know what to put into your book: To my host and hostess of Temple ——, or To Ralph and to Vera Carstairs? Which? Or is there any other form?"

"*Names* where friends are concerned. Vera 'll allow it, I'm sure."

"Very well," said Wordsworth, as Carstairs looked at the other book, "'Ralph and Vera Carstairs, from their friend Paul Wordsworth, in memory of their kindness?' No, I'll feel that—I won't write it."

Her husband said to Vera that night :  
“ I congratulate you on your conquest ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Don't be alarmed. *I'm* not ! And don't tell me that you think it is in the ordinary course of things that Wordsworth should make this his home, or that a busy man, and one who never wastes a penny, should make a book like that of yours ! Think of what it cost in money, besides the far greater compliment of thought and originality.”

“ O, why do you spoil my pleasure in it ? ” she exclaimed, and suddenly burst into tears.

He was perplexed, but what he thought was not easy to guess, and Vera never knew whether from that hour might be dated the turn of the tide, for he per-

sisted: "Rubbish! spoil your pleasure? I don't say that Wordsworth's in love with you,—and if he were, for the time, a woman might have more to spoil her pleasure than being chaffed by her husband about captivating an anchorite like Sage Paul."



## CHAPTER V.

### WHY WAS HE ANGRY ?

“ But enough of this ; we will not pierce our hearts with a thousand separate stings, but be satisfied with the mere knowledge that all came to pass on this occasion as I have said. Poor Undine was very mournful ; the others not well satisfied ; Bertalda especially . . . . assumed an imperious manner.”—*Undine*.

OF all the small things in which we fancy that we can “improve upon Providence,” there are few which we would more like to reform than that peculiar little habit of Fate by which she likes to undertake so many similar plots at once. The proverbial lore of all nations shows that it is recognized that worry is a creature of gregarious nature—never known to live for an hour in single blessedness, and capable of producing an infinite number of de-

scendants in an infinitesimally short time. Meditation on the difference between the geometrical increase of pain and the merely arithmetical multiplication of pleasure from units of the same value, furnishes us with a sum of the whole duty of Man—to plant out, at starting, as many happiness-units as possible, that the pain-centres, so gifted with productive powers, may not occupy all the ground of life. The aim of the philanthropist is to make the result of the greater number treated as units equivalent to the result of the small number considered as squares.

One is obliged to go out of one's way in these days to make the evident appear difficult—otherwise, with no obscurity, how should the congregation find anything to respect? In plain English we mean that,

like every one else, when once irritated, Sir Ralph Carstairs found nothing but matters for irritation in the great and small events of the next fortnight. Paul Wordsworth went away quite suddenly at last, and Carstairs could not make out whether he had overheard part of a scene of the type several times reported between husband and wife: of course Carstairs knew that if Wordsworth had heard those bullying words it was simply because Carstairs had passed with his wife in front of the yew hedge below which Wordsworth had been for some time seated. He might have heard, unavoidably. Carstairs did not know, and never could find out.

As a matter of fact Wordsworth had heard only a sentence or two, but enough to make his blood boil, enough to make

him withdraw his personal feeling for Carstairs, enough to make him understand what, since he had seen husband and wife together, he had considered as scandal and exaggeration. He had been deceived a little by Vera's loyalty, and by the more ceremonious treatment latterly adopted by Carstairs and his wife in public, as also in private he had been more gentle to her.

Bound in honour to say nothing of what he had so accidentally overheard in the yew labyrinth, Wordsworth thought the more of it, and the more he thought, the less he liked it.

Beginning with the usual regrets and compliments, on parting he only said to her: "I shall never forget this pleasant visit, and I want you to promise me that

in any difficulty you will ask me to help you."

Then, finding that what he wanted to say was not to be said in ceremonious words, he finished with more show of feeling :

"I am a good deal older than you are, and a man of your husband's standing; I should like to hear you promise *this*: let me be a friend in need. You will be sure that I understand, perhaps know, more than you think. There, we'll say no more. Don't think me impertinent. Only in any worry know that you can depend on me absolutely; send for me when you will, you know that I would make all possible sacrifice and come to you; and that it would be the greatest pleasure to help you. Nothing for you would be too small

or too great. Promise you will trust me—should need arise.”

He said all this very quickly.

“I will trust you—should need arise.”  
she answered.

Nothing more was said; nor did they attempt to laugh off their earnestness. But Vera repeated to herself the words, “a good deal older than you are,” and suddenly realized how very young she was and how very old she felt at five-and-twenty.

That was for Carstairs a secret little worry—that he was conscious of just failing to make the right personal impression on Wordsworth. However, aggravating as it was to fail by so little, this was, after all, no matter; Wordsworth had become as intimate with him as one man of the

world ever is with another. Wordsworth must now know that it was his interest—as it is really the interest of all leaders to help forward able men—to make much of one whose abilities, work and wealth had been so impressively and studiously made known to him in the pleasantest fashion.

And yet Carstairs felt that the instantaneous revelation of his unchivalrous nature had been a grave mistake—a piece of bad luck, such as just then often occurred. The aggravatingness of a series of small *contretemps* is never properly estimated: to outsiders they seem nothing, while on the patient they have an accumulative effect. So, a farm suddenly thrown on his hands, a horse spiking itself, a deed mislaid, a guest of importance excusing himself, a rather unsatisfactory audit, a

week's dull house-party, misfortune to some prize stock, some nasty speeches from Georgie, some duns about Charlie, who had, of course, failed to pass his exam. in July, all these rubbed Sir Ralph the wrong way. It so happened that, though Opposition can never get into such hot water as does Government, the party was not then quite happy in attack; also, though in itself a compliment, the press had begun to single Carstairs out for abuse. Although a man tells himself that this is the best thing that can possibly happen to him and does not mind in the least the full severity of opposition, he is always unduly and disproportionately irritated by the side-issues and minor personal hits in the encounter. Altogether, as Charlie Carstairs observed on arrival, about the third week in October,

“Ralph was like a bear with a sore head.” He really had been quite amicable for three months, and Vera was as much disappointed as distressed to find that there now was no pleasing him.

Charlie was not improved by the last six months, especially by the last spell of idleness; he perhaps deserved his brother's crossness, and Georgie, who just then found Ralph most uncertain, may well be left to take care of herself. Vera treated Grey with neither more nor less coldness than any casual visitor to Temple; but his position, though it might have been made awkward for him by her, was serene and secure compared with that of Georgie. Georgie was looking far from well, as Charlie told her promptly before Grey, and—

"I say," said he to Grey, when Georgie had walked off in disgust, "you've caught a Tartar, do you know?"

Grey looked his indignation, then suddenly tried to assume it was a joke and smiled.

"Or did the Tartar catch you? Now, my dear fellow, I know Miss Georgie from the beginning——"

"If you don't like to shut up on your own account you'll have to on mine," answered Grey, getting up. "If you can only behave as a boy—an ill-mannered boy too—I'll treat you as one."

"Try it on," laughed Charlie, who was most irritating at that stage.

"If you don't take care, I will," responded Grey. "A jolly good thrashing is the only thing that would do you good;

you're an insolent puppy, and if I thrashed you I think I should have a public subscription raised for me! You're just the most objectionable kind of youth man can meet with—you swaggering, idle, good-for-nothing animals who cheek your elders and chatter about women in a way which only shows your ignorance of the common decencies of life!"

"Just think of that now! Lor'!"

"I'll try not to. You can't even answer a fellow when he pitches into you except in street slang and gestures. Thank heaven! with all my failings I never went through this. Yet it seems the favourite thing now. Ten years ago I'd have felt myself disgraced for life if I'd laid myself open to the things I've said to you. You can laugh it off as you like."

"It would make a cat laugh to think of your thrashing me."

"I'd do it in a couple of seconds if you were either a little younger or older, and if unfortunately I wasn't your brother's guest."

"*Pray* don't mind," returned Charlie politely.

"You'd be sorry, if I did," answered Grey shortly; for, with all his graces and veneer, Grey had had many adventures in his wandering ante-Parliament days, and though he looked a fine gentleman—in a crowd always pointed out as "the swell"—physical weakness was not his failing. He knew that, spite of Charlie's swagger and squareness, he *could* thrash the youth, so the angered man in Meredith did not overpower the gentleman.

"Some one would be sorry if you tried it on," returned Charlie again.

"So I think," answered Meredith, and left Charlie to his own devices, much to the boy's disappointment, for out of sheer mischief he was "dying for a row." Charlie did not in the least care that he had thrown away a man who had been and would be a good friend to him. Have boys of his type any feeling at all? Alas! in these days such beings are everywhere; it is unfortunately easy to secure specimens for study, and, unashamed of their deficiencies, they will deliberately aid you in your vivisection by acknowledging their defects, proud not to be pretenders to better things.

After all, Charlie was only a younger, idler and dependent Carstairs, and Ralph

an equally selfish, but in some ways a more self-respecting, Charlie!

Was his devotion to Vera assumed or did her goodness to him awake something of chivalry to her? Surely there must be something of finer instinct in the son of gentle ancestors. Yet—who can tell?

Vera treated him with kindness, and at least in her presence he restrained his tongue a little. But then it was to his interest to keep on good terms with her.

Very weakly — the weakest thing she ever did perhaps—she promised “not to tell Ralph” when Charlie took her on that condition into his confidence.

However—on sounding Ralph with reference to something else—she found that the condition was useless, as Ralph did

not intend to listen to anything about his brother.

“He knows that he will have £6,000 of his own when he comes of age. If he were steady I’d do something for him; if he isn’t he’ll have to pay his debts and live on the remainder: he’ll find it will go a long way.”

Charlie only grumbled at the inequality of things which gave Ralph £20,000 a year and himself £6,000 for life; he had no intention of doing better even when Ralph expressed his intention in that event to make him a good allowance and give him a fair start.

“What *will* you do?” said Vera in despair, as he declared his intention of doing nothing: he had had enough of a grind; perhaps might coach for the F.O.

at five and twenty—no, not Oxford; should be plucked for smalls, &c., &c.

“I shall marry an heiress,” he asserted.

“Heiresses have more foresight and a wider choice than they used to have,” replied Vera, “and I don’t think they’re likely to choose the very worst specimen of a selfish man they could find in town.”

“Oh!” said Charlie, not taking offence—these youths never do; “then, men must degenerate after they’re married—by Jove! And I guess you couldn’t have done much worse than Ralph.”

“I was not an heiress. And Ralph is very different to you,” said Vera, taking from him a paper knife he was breaking.

“What’s that?” said Carstairs, who entered.

“Charlie counting his prospects of matrimony,” answered Vera.

“Prospects of gaol! That’s where he’ll end.”

“All the same, Ralph; fettered not free,” retorted Charlie. These youths who do nothing but talk are ready enough with their tongues.

“Get out with you now; I want to speak to Vera.”

“So do I,” said Charlie. But he had to go.

Then Carstairs went up to the window below which his wife was seated. The many coloured single dahlias were looking askance at the scene, for the sun had turned most of them to the west, and the boudoir window was full south. The blaze of colour, low down on the shiny glass, and the autumnal woods beyond were the background of Vera’s chair in which she

sat in her dark dress, looking at her husband in wonder as his expression changed. She ought to have been used to his temper, but she never was.

“Is anything wrong, Ralph?” she asked as he glared at her.

“Wrong? Oh! no,” he said with sarcasm.

Then he caught her hand roughly and dragged her to her feet.

Just at this time Charlie came round to the other window. It was shut. So he heard nothing, but, with no scruples about witnessing “a row,” he stayed there unremarked. The east window of course was at right angles to the south, and Vera was too terrified to see anything but her husband’s face, though Charlie tried to make signs to her behind Ralph’s back.

He had not perceived the means by

which she had been dragged up to face Ralph, but he saw that she was frightened. After past experiences Charlie did not feel inclined to interfere. Besides he never supposed a "row" meant more than a "row in words."

But he saw all the pantomime of the short scene:—

"You'd better speak. It's your only chance."

Vera looked astonishment, and Sir Ralph tightened his hold to torture on her wrist,—this Charlie could not see, as Ralph's body hid their hands.

"What about? I don't understand you."

A shrug of Ralph's shoulders. His head bent nearer Vera. She tried to recoil.

"Don't say that. I'll refresh your memory a little."

"But, Ralph, I don't know what you mean."

"You lie! Where did you go to that night you left the House when I was speaking?"

"Which night? Why?"

Vera's face was crimson. ["Wonder what Ralph's saying; I believe she looks ashamed of herself. I say! it is a *big* row this time. If it gets worse I'll run round," thought Charlie.]

"Which night? Why? The night in August when you came down to the House."

"We went on the Terrace and then I went home."

"Straight home?"

"I don't remember. I think so. Yes."

"I thought [you went round by the Bentleys'."

“Yes: I remember. I had forgotten.”

“Shows how truthful you are.”

“My dear Ralph! Why should I remember at a moment’s notice?”

“Don’t try that on; you’ll try me too far.”

She struggled to get free. Charlie left his vantage post.

“Are you mad?”

“No; shall be soon.”

“Tell me what you mean, Ralph: I honestly do not know any single thing which I have done to displease you willingly.”

“I give you till post-time to think it over; if you are wise, you’ll confess before then.”

“What has post-time to do with it? Ralph, are you quite well?”

“Quite. I wait for this evening’s post.

Then I go to town. I know more than you think."

"What? I *don't* know what you mean," she reiterated, as he pushed her angrily from him, so that she fell against a sharp-edged cabinet, just as Charlie entered.

Ralph strode out and left them together. The pain of the collision was a little bewildering, as had been the whole dialogue to one who had not the key which Georgie might have possessed.

The situation roused even Charlie to compassion.

"What's up?"

"I don't know; nothing much," said Vera. The blow had brought muscular tears, and she could not keep her eye open, so that could not be passed off as nothing.

"I saw him throw you over, so you needn't humbug about that, you know," blurted out Charlie. "What I mean is, what's up? What did he do it for?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. He is angry. I dare say we shall hear what it is some time."

"You're larking."

"I *really* don't know."

"No humbug?"

"No: he's angry about something which happened one night in August, but he's sure to find that I've nothing to do with it."

"That won't whiten your eye. I say, Vera, it will be an awful black eye if you do nothing for it. A woman's skin's good for nothing. You'd better bathe it."

Meanwhile, as Sir Ralph, wishing to talk

to Vera, had turned Charlie out, so he now turned out Grey, whom he found with Georgie, quarrelling if the truth were known. Georgie also had had a fit of temper, and, on being asked whether she wouldn't name the day for the marriage, had replied that "She didn't care if it never took place."



## CHAPTER VI.

### BUSINESS.

“She found me roots of relish sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna dew;  
And sure in language strange she said—  
‘I love thee true.’”

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci.*

GREY departed unwillingly, but others came in to whom Carstairs was obliged to use more ceremony. Half an hour or so was wasted before he said, *tout court*, “I wish to speak to my cousin, if you’ll excuse us.”

They went into his business-room, whence at 5 o’clock the clerks departed. It was a bare plainly-furnished den, nor had decorations save a print or two, and for furniture two desks, a writing-table, on which a lamp had just been placed, small

book-cases with works of reference, and pigeon-holes, with multiplicity of blue and grey papers protruding. A little, thin, nervous man was just leaving the room.

“Your speech is ready for Thursday, Sir Ralph,” said the man, meaning thereby that, after Sir Ralph had indicated in rough fashion what he wished to have looked up, it had all been arranged for him, as the kitchen-maid prepares the materials for the cook.

“All right. There’s a shooting-party in the morning; probably this time to-morrow, or a little earlier, I’ll go over it with you. You can go on with everything as usual.”

“Might I show you these, Sir Ralph?”

“Sit down there a moment or two, Georgie.”

The two men rapidly collated a few papers, orders were given, one or two points raised, Sir Ralph speaking in a peremptory manner, very different from Paul Wordsworth's treatment of his secretaries; both equally curt in speech and decisive in action, but one never remembering, the other never forgetting, that he spoke to hard-working human beings. However, that did not jar upon Georgie. She was only bored by having to wait, yet she too was very, very nervous, not sorry for the delay; she was half triumphant, half frightened.

Rising to go the man asked:

"Shall I bring in the letters as usual, Sir Ralph, at half-past five?"

"Of course. All letters come here. Why the devil do you want to change to-day?"

The little man disappeared, and at length Georgie had the honour of the whole attention of her cousin. The fire-light perhaps, as against the lamp, was strong enough to give a glow to her dark skin. She was in a black frock, with her favourite red vest and little red shoes, with open-work black stockings; for background only the rigid book-shelves, and the dull green walls, with dark wainscot, a Turkey rug beneath her feet. Carstairs stroked down his trim beard as he drew in a chair to the other side of the fire, and began to smoke a cigar.

“Not very comfortable for you, but that is no matter just now; that was my intention in bringing you here, in fact. Do you realize what you are doing? It means *business*.”

He looked at her sternly, and his voice was husky.

"You have a cold," she said.

"That's the only thing I haven't got. *Do you know what you're doing?*"

Silence.

"Well, I'll put it in another way. Are you sure that you are speaking the truth? Do you believe your own charge against—my wife?"

"I have told you all now. The proof will be in your hand to-night."

"Yes, proof, if it is as you say, that Wordsworth wrote to her more warmly than he should in right; no proof that she encouraged him."

"He has paid you a long visit. What is his object in doing so? And, after that letter in August, Vera must have over-

looked it as—— It is impossible. She could only have had him here——”

“Yet your other theory is in favour of her having more duplicity—a duplicity which seems absolutely foreign to her nature. She may have forgiven him, and I remember that she was reluctant enough to have him here.”

“Is that letter a fact or not?”

“A fact, I suppose; since you promise me the original in Wordsworth’s writing by this post. Tell me the details that I may see whether there is some mistake. I don’t want your deductions or apologies. Answer me as if you were on oath.”

“Is that a proper way to speak to me?”

“I can’t pick my words or tones. Are you sure that, from your old jealousy of

my wife, and out of Bennett's revenge on her dismissal, you are not deceived?"

He was very anxious; he used throughout the expression, "my wife;" no affection in his tone to Georgie.

"I am tired of this. How can we be deceived? You know that Bennett picked up the note in Vera's room: there it is—a real, actual note. You know that I found it might be awkward to bring Bennett, so left her in town. Already Mr. Wordsworth had been here a month, you frequently absent, and when you were at home only afraid—you fool!" she laughed scornfully, "that Vera might not make his visit pleasant enough. You know how little he mixed with your other guests. You know—why! that book you told me of with pride. But even——"

“But even if it is that, my wife is the sort of woman to be a good friend to a man who liked her.”

“Gracious! Ralph; you turn like a weathercock.”

“Turn like a weathercock? Do you mean to say that I can take this lightly? Do you know, Georgie, you had better take care? You assured me that you had nothing to do with these anonymous letters, but when I tracked the writer, when I came to you, you supported Bennett; you obtain from her the proof which is to shelter her. You have so worked on my mind that I am ready to admit what truly seems to me the impossible: you are ready to break your engagement——”

“I never told you so,” she answered.

“Not in so many words. You know well the power which sometimes you have over me. I only say that, however much the two seem to be opposed, that moment you destroy my trust in my wife, that moment your power in me will go. You will be associated with the most disagreeable and publicly dishonourable episode in my life. As I said before, I say now. You have played with fire, and remember it will not be possible to keep it invisible. England will blaze with the scandal; my wife—Paul Wordsworth.”

“Scandals don’t always spread.”

“You are a nice woman! Well, set aside all else, you may get your way, and separate me from my wife; but my life in England is over. Every link which binds me to the past will be severed.

You had better not break your engagement—even if you are right, and if you are wrong——”

“You spoke differently this morning,” she answered grimly as a handsome young woman could speak.

“I have now considered the matter. That is all I have to say. Prove your case, and when you have proved it the only satisfaction you shall get is that you will have humiliated your rival. I shall have done with both of you.”

“Oh!” hissed Georgie. “If I were a man!”

The door opened ungently, and Charlie entered.

“You there. Look here, Ralph. I won’t stand Vera being treated like that. I give you fair warning if you do it again

I'll—I'll do something. For no cause at all."

"For no cause?"

"None that concerns her. I don't know what excuse you make to yourself for throwing her about like that; but I told her I'd give you a piece of my mind."

"Did she tell you why I spoke to her? She fell, of course, against the furniture."

"One would think she and you were costermongers," said Charlie. "That's the stock excuse when a wife has a black eye, that she fell against the furniture. But, if you like to be a costermonger, what she fell against the furniture for, you may know, for she doesn't."

"As if she'd tell you!" said Georgie.

"What concerns you to put your nose into it?" retorted Charlie. "I've been

looking for Ralph for nearly an hour, or else I'd not have given *you* the satisfaction of hearing this! Now I've warned you, Ralph. You will have to settle with me next time," he continued, and retreated with a very passable (if, to those who knew Charlie, a somewhat ludicrous) assumption of dignity.

"What's this?" said Georgie. "Have you been speaking to Vera?"

"Why not?"

"I thought you said you'd only watch."

"As if I could wait! However, if she's innocent—and, upon my soul, I think she may be—at least I *can't* think her guilty——"

Georgie shrugged her shoulders.

"Look here! everything's to go on as usual! Heaven grant that you're a liar!"

He got up and walked about the room. Georgie rose too.

They met and faced each other before the fire. She spoke in a low quiet tone.

“Call me a liar! I will only forgive you if you remember the truth that nothing—either fact—yes, *fact*—or inference—rests upon my assertion. It was you who took me into your confidence, and I have done nothing more than procure that letter for you; which otherwise you might have had difficulty in obtaining at any price.”

“I did not want your proof. I preferred to treat the once anonymous slanderer with contempt.”

“Was it not better to put it to the test?”

The door opened. With a footman

bringing in the bags came the secretary with his key.

“Shall I open the bags, Sir Ralph?”

“Certainly.”

As usual the secretary opened the bags, and with the quickness of skilled eyes and fingers separated the correspondence; first into two heaps—that for Sir Ralph and that for the house, then this latter first into divisions for the servants and for the house party; and was about to hand those to the footman, who waited to carry them to the hall table, when Georgie interposed.

“None for me, Mr. Jones?”

He gave her her bundle. By chance next to it was Vera’s heap, and at the top a letter initialed in the corner P.W. She saw this as the footman took all away.

“Leave the rest for five minutes, Mr.

Jones," said Carstairs, as the little secretary began to turn over the remainder to separate Carstairs' private letters from the other correspondence of his chief.

The little man disappeared with jerky movements, as if he had been touched by a spring.

"Now," said Carstairs, "where is it?"

She had, with trembling fingers, selected the letter in Bennett's writing from her heap.

"DEAR MISS GEORGIE—MADAM,

"I send you the note in return for the money and the signed promise from Sir Ralph.

"Your faithful servant,

"MERCY BENNETT.

"P.S.—Please tell me if it arrives safe. I would not have given it to no one but you."

Sealed up with wax, impressed by a thimble, was the "Letter found in L. C.'s room, 14th Aug."

"It is mine," said Carstairs, and taking it from her, put it in his pocket. "Now go. Tell Jones to come as you pass."

"Why don't you go and see what the letter is from Wordsworth?"

"Has she one?"

"Yes."

"Leave me now," was all he said, but she, who knew him well, was not deceived by the calmness. He called her back at the door. "Georgie! not a word! Everything as usual. If you warn Vera by a look I never speak to you again—and no loss either," he muttered to himself, for she had done more to disgust him in this than in anything. He could not help seeing what

she counted on. And the more she made him believe in the probability that he had lost Vera, the more he hated Georgie. He had, as she said, placed her in this position, as at once the arbiter of and the probable gainer by the strife, but because she occupied it she had offended him. He had no idea how much he had learnt to care for his wife till then.

While Georgie found herself beset by Grey, Mr. Jones showed Carstairs the correspondence of the day. He set the little man to work ; some of the business was pressing, difficult and immediate ; the post was sent out at nine, and decided steps had to be taken in an important matter ; then, and not till then, he broke the seal, and saw, undoubtedly in Paul Wordsworth's own writing, the words which condemned

the woman to whom they were addressed, if she, being the wife of another, had not repulsed them.

He groaned. The little clerk turned round. "I was talking to myself," Carstairs answered. "I will dictate to you now ; give me a moment or two."

It was as well that the business in question affected him seriously, if it had to be done at all. Perhaps otherwise he could not have got through with it, but a good couple of hours elapsed before, on the dressing gong sounding, Carstairs stopped.

"Troublesome work, Mr. Jones," he remarked.

"Troublesome, indeed, Sir Ralph. It should be done to-night—and I——"

"If you can go on I shall stay and finish

it. Are you able for it? Can you work till nine?"

"Certainly, Sir Ralph," said the man, astonished at the question.

"Ring the bell then."

So when the party assembled, Vera had to inform the next important guest that her husband had received some work which had to be finished before post-time. It was a large party; one of the best coverts had to be shot in the morning, but everyone knew that just then Carstairs, even in the country, was by no means master of his own time.

When the ladies left the drawing-room a message came to her, and Vera went into the library, leaving Georgie to entertain the ladies.

Paul Wordsworth got up to meet her,

and between them the arrangements were made that he would wait and have supper with her husband, who had sent to order it for himself at a quarter past nine.

“The slave of the post-bag, as usual,” said Paul. “You got my note?”

“Just before dinner. But I haven’t told Ralph you were coming. It was so curious; I missed that note I suppose, or it must have got with some one’s letters, for I did not find it with the rest. By that time Ralph had sent the message saying that he wasn’t to be disturbed. I must go back to the others. You and Ralph will join us afterwards. Ah! here he is!”

“Ralph, Mr. Wordsworth sent a line to say he was coming at nine to-night, but I only knew it after you were busy.”

“ You see, I take you at your word,” said Wordsworth ; “ you promised me a welcome any day or hour.”

Vera returned to her guests.

And now Paul Wordsworth and Ralph Carstairs were face to face.

END OF VOL. II.

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